

# السنقاء the PHOENIX

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Compiled and distributed by Michael C Jennings (ABBA Co-ordinator)

for contributors to the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

## First breeding of Spotted Crake in Arabia

by Khaled Al-Ghanem

The spotted crake *Porzana porzana* is known throughout Arabia as a rather scarce migrant, from March to May and from September to November, with a few birds wintering. During the ABBA period there have been a number of records suggesting birds might stay on to over-summer and possibly even breed. In central Arabia pairs have been reported in early summer (1986) and there have even been instances of territorial behaviour and calling reported from Yemen (1988). There were birds at Sabkha Al-Fasl in the Eastern Province in June 1998 (Meadows, 2004) and nearby at Jubail in June 2004.

The majority of recent suspected breeding records have come from Kuwait. Since about 1998 there have been numerous records of birds in summer and calling at several sites. In the last few years summering and calling birds have been reported from Sabah Al-Salem reedbeds a waste water outfall to the east of Jahra, Jahra Pool Reserve, Doha South Nature Reserve and a reedbed east of Doha (all these sites are in NB35, to the west of Kuwait city) and at the Sewer Plant reedbed in the south of the country (Gregory, 2005a). Five pairs were suspected of breeding in Kuwait in 2004 (Gregory 2005b).

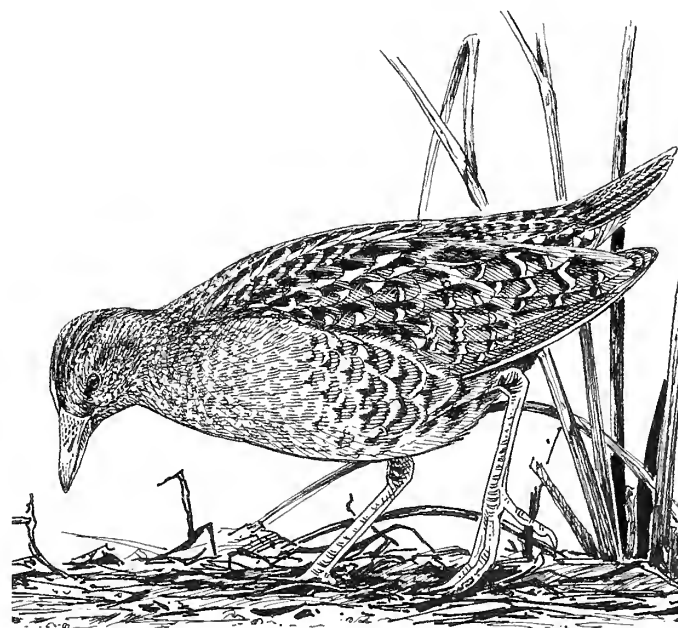
Unfortunately the combination of the skulking behaviour of this species and the usually difficult-to-access habitat they choose, means that it is very difficult to get good observations of breeding.

In 2001 at least three adult spotted crakes were present at Jahra Pool Reserve in Kuwait during August and September. They were more than usually skulking and were only occasionally seen around the base of reeds at the edge of the sewage-fed pools which make up the core of the reserve. Suspicions that they were breeding were confirmed on 17 September, when a newly-fledged juvenile was observed fairly close to two adults. This bird actually

emerged from the reeds and half-walked, half-swam through the frothy surface of the shallow sewage water, becoming very bedraggled as it did so. It clearly could not fly very strongly. I took several photographs, which show the juvenile features of the bird (see page 3). A number of brief sightings of spotted crakes were made during the rest of the year.

**References:** ● Gregory, G. 2005a. *The birds of the State of Kuwait*. Skegness. ● Gregory, G. 2005b. Breeding birds in Kuwait 2004. *Phoenix* 21:24-27. ● Meadows, B S. 2004. Sites of Interest; Sabkha al Fasl, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia. *Phoenix* 20:12-13, 16.

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## ABBA Progress Report

ABBA has been a long slog but the end is now clearly in view. The current timetable for the completion of the main part of the ABBA manuscript is 'spring 2007', but it will probably be nearer the first day of summer than the last day of winter. I feel confident of meeting this deadline but there are still several other significant and outstanding issues to resolve although if these are sorted out quickly there is a possibility that the atlas could be published before the end of 2008. It is planned that the atlas will come complete with a CD of all the records on the database for those wanting more detail of individual records and species in the atlas. Exactly how the CD will be arranged is not worked out yet but it will include everything on the database, observers and other sources such as museum specimens and published material.

Publication does not mean the end of the ABBA project, it might only be 'Phase I' as there are already plans to keep the database and *Phoenix* going indefinitely. The database will be added to and the data will be available to anyone who wants to use it. *Phoenix* will continue to be produced annually, summarising the results of new information more or less as it does now. However with the completion of the atlas there is perhaps an opportunity for *Phoenix* to take on a different format. Readers may have ideas on the way *Phoenix* could go? Maybe it could expanded as a newsletter covering all aspect of Arabian birds, not just breeding birds or even other fauna? Perhaps its geographical scope should change or it should be issued more frequently? Any ideas or suggestions from readers as to the future format of *Phoenix* would be welcomed.

New breeding birds are still being found regularly for Arabia, in this issue there are details of the first confirmed breeding of the spotted crane *Porzana porzana* in Kuwait, details of breeding in 2001 have only just come to light. This species has long been suspected of breeding but the difficulty in getting good observations from dense reedbeds has always hampered getting the proof. There is also the inevitable new exotic breeder, the yellow-crowned bishop *Euplectes afer* in UAE.

With the end of ABBA 'Phase I' in sight those observers still sitting on important records should get them to me within the next six months or they might not get into the atlas at all.



### UAE Cattle Egret colony finally unveiled

by Simon Aspinall

In Arabia the cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis* only breeds regularly in south-western parts of the peninsula, on the Tihama of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It is a winter visitor from northern breeding populations, possibly from the Caspian region or eastern Turkey, to the remainder of the peninsula. It built at least one nest near al Ha'ir south of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1996 and in northern Oman in 2002 nests were built and eggs laid but breeding was not successful because nests were apparently predated by house crows *Corvus splendens*. The species is less tied to wetlands than other heron species in Arabia, except for the nest site itself which is generally, but not invariably, somewhere close to water.

The cattle egret has a massive world range, appearing across

southern Europe, north and central Africa, southern Asia east to Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia and eastern North America south to northern and central South America. In recent years long distance expansion has been noted, with rapid colonisation of new ground in widely spaced geographical areas, in North America and Europe, for example. The reasons for such a rapid increase are doubtless partly climatic, but otherwise somewhat obscure. As recently as the early 1970s this species was regarded as an exceptionally rare bird in eastern Arabia and the Arabian Gulf but today it is a common winter visitor and migrant. The increase in range and numbers in the central Asian region is probably the main reason for this.

The Dubai pivots and al Awir area, including Warsan lakes, has been a favoured feeding site of this species for many years and since the late 1990s a flock, many of the birds adults in nuptial plumage, has over-summured locally. This led to speculation that they were breeding nearby, but no-one managed to pinpoint where the birds headed to after feeding, even if it now seems obvious that they invariably took a straight line back to their nest-site. On 4 June 2006 the mystery was solved when the author made a casual inquiry after seeing breeding-plumaged birds on an irrigated roundabout and was promptly taken to see a colony of 35-40 pairs in the grounds of a large private residence near Khor Dubai. All the nests are in a single large 'ghaf' *Prosopis cineraria* tree overhanging a lawn, with ornamental lakes and ponds nearby. At the time several young had already fledged and were feeding on the lawns.

This colony, he was informed, had started some eight years earlier when free-living pinioned birds attracted two or three wild pairs which then remained to breed, the colony increasing annually thereafter. In addition to the cattle egrets four or five nesting pairs of sacred ibis *Threskionis aethiopicus* were also present at the site.

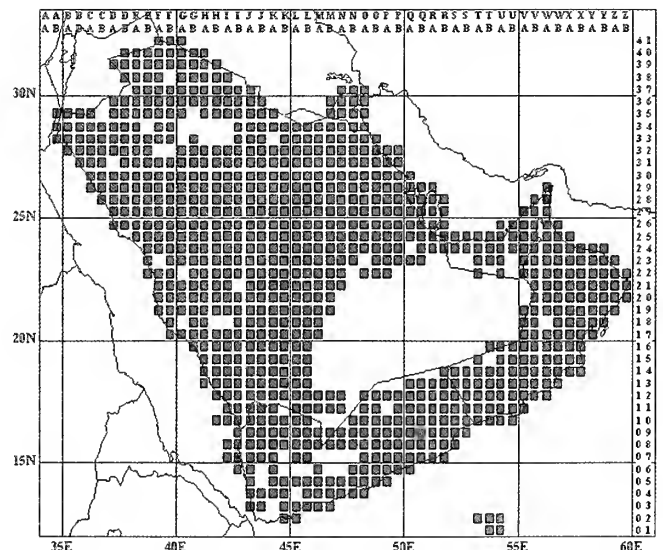
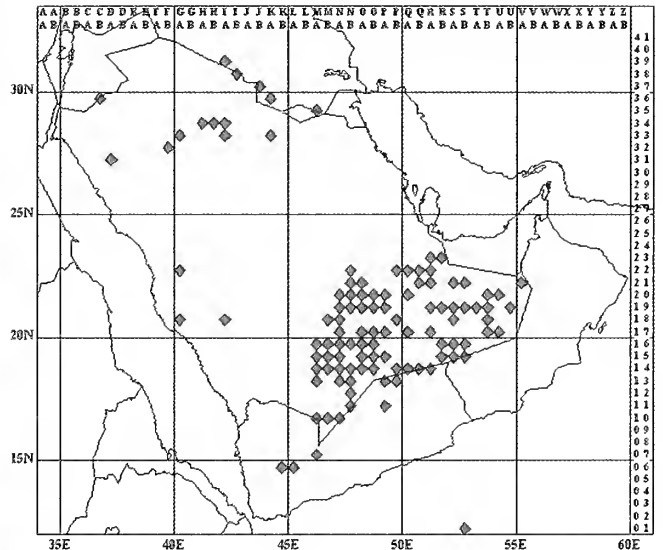
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### New Breeding Exotic: Yellow-crowned Bishop

The list of exotic species breeding ferally in Arabia continues to grow. The weavers are probably already the best represented family amongst the aliens and now they are joined by another member. The African range of the yellow-crowned bishop *Euplectes afer* extends over much of Africa south of the Sahara. It has been reported from Oman and the UAE since about 1998 and there have been various suggestions that it has bred but like most other exotics few observers have been sufficiently excited about the event to make a note of the actual breeding evidence. Tommy Pedersen the UAE recorder now has a record of a male with four juveniles at the Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club (UA25) on 25 November 2005. So in all probability it does breed and so it has been added to the list of ABBA breeding birds. At Dubai Pivot Fields (VB27) up to 11 birds have been recorded regularly (males often displaying) from 28 October 2005 to summer 2006 but there is no clear evidence of breeding there yet. All sightings in the UAE relate to the nominate subspecies.

In Oman the species was first seen on 19 March 1998 at al Ansab, up to four were at Qurm nature reserve from August 1999 to October 2004 and there were up to three at Ras al Hamra in

(Continued on page 4).



Clockwise from top left. 1. Spotted crane *Porzana porzana* chick, Jahra Pool Reserve, Kuwait. Proof at last for a long suspected breeding bird. See page 1. (Photo: Khaled al Ghanem). 2. The yellow-crowned bishop *Euplectes afer* is the latest breeding exotic in the UAE. See page 2. (Photo: Tommy Pedersen). 3. Map shows ABBA squares with no ABBA records of any kind, fortunately the unatlassed squares are mostly in the Empty Quarter where bird diversity is very low. 4. Map shows those ABBA squares visited during the 37 ABBA Surveys to date. Red squares are those squares where there are no records from any other source. See page 4 for some ABBA statistics. 5. Khor Kalba mangroves, the haunt of Sykes's warbler *Hippolais rama* and clamorous warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus*. The Sykes's warbler sings from the tall trees and nests in the small bushes. See page 4. (Photo: Michael Jennings).

September 2003, all in YA24. There are no more recent observations and it seems to have disappeared from the Muscat area.

Exotics now make up over 10% of all breeding birds in Arabia so they are a segment of the avifauna that can no longer be ignored. Any news about breeding exotics will be gratefully received. Is the next breeding exotic to be the monk parakeet *Myiopsitta monachus*? A pair were found at a potential nest hole in Safa Park Dubai on 28 October 2005 (Tommy Pedersen & O B Hansen) and again on 08 January 2006. Is this species going to be the first neotropical bird (South American) to go feral in Arabia.



Tristram's grackle *Onychognathus tristramii*. A pair nested in an aircraft hanger at Thumrait (UA12), southern Oman, with young heard from 28 April 2006 (Steve Tibbett). First Thumrait breeding.

## ABBA Coverage - some statistics

For the purpose of mapping bird distribution in Arabia the ABBA project has divided the peninsula up into 1,137 half degree distribution squares, these are approximately 3,000 km<sup>2</sup> each. At present there are still 107 squares with no records in them at all see map on page 3. Maybe some enterprising observers can get to one or more of these squares early in 2006? Fortunately the large majority of the gaps are in one block in the core area of the Empty Quarter which is not all that important as far as most species are concerned. During the 37 ABBA surveys since 1985 some 876 squares have been visited and for 185 of these there are no other records from any other source, i.e. observers, literature or museum specimens. Of the total of 1,030 squares for which there are records, ABBA surveys have failed to get to 154 of them. (See maps page 3).

The approximately 63,000 records on the database have been compiled from reports from over 400 observers who have contributed records, mostly directly but some second hand via others. More than 1000 literature sources (including grey literature) have been reviewed to extract records.

Please note that for various reasons the map format used on page 3 is unfortunately a transitional digital map which shows obsolete borders and has other serious defects, e.g. Socotra is omitted. This map format will not be used in the final atlas.

## Sykes and Clamorous Warblers at Khor Kalba

On 26 Feb 2006 I carried out a dawn transect census beside the Khor Kalba (WA27) mangroves *Avicennia marina* on the UAE East Coast to get pointers on what species might be present and in what sort of quantities. Starting at 0701 hrs (sunrise was about 0650 hrs) I walked southwards for half an hour on the western side of the mangroves, with the mangroves on my left and barren subkha on my right. This was a linear walk making steady progress and in the half hour I reached a point 1.6 km from where I started (from GPS readings).

Six singing Sykes warblers *Hippolais rama* and seven singing clamorous warblers *Acrocephalus stentoreus* were heard, or seen, amongst other species, within about a distance of 100 m on my left. The Sykes warblers tended to sing from the edge of the mangrove where there were tall old trees and a low under story of bushes. They sang from the near the top of the canopy in a semi concealed position. The clamorous warblers were singing from further in the mangrove stands and were sometimes hidden and sometimes exposed. The Sykes were singing in bursts of 5-15 seconds with a longer gap between bursts. After several song bursts from one tree the male would move on to an adjacent tree. Sykes's are known to nest in low mangrove bushes on the edge of the thicket (Castell 1999) but they sing from tall trees so they need both types of vegetation in their breeding habitat (see page 3). This was borne out to some extent by there being five singing males in the part of the transect where there were tall trees and only one in an extensive area, at least a third the distance travelled, where there were just low bushes without tall trees. On the walk back to the start point, along the route of the transect, I heard only two singing Sykes so perhaps they sing more commonly and vigorously just after dawn. They were also singing at the same site at midday on 25 February when I had three singing in earshot of the place where I had lunch. None were singing in mid morning on 25 February on the other side of the creek but I am not sure whether this was due to disturbance, less than favourable habitat (although it seemed the same) or that they do not sing in mid morning.

Assuming the species only inhabits the mangrove fringes there may be a linear 10 km of suitable habitat in all at the mangroves which extend along the coast from Kalba to the Oman border. Therefore an estimated maximum population for these mangroves might be about 30-40 pairs (10 km ÷ 1.6 X 6).

One disturbing bit of information that Castell (1999) obtained was that at least one Sykes' nest was predated by clamorous warbler and perhaps there were others. Whilst the clamorous warbler was first recorded in the Kalba mangroves as long ago as 1971 it is only in the late 1980s and 1990s that it has become common there. As the Sykes warbler has presumably been there a lot longer, it is worrying that this prime site for the species might actually be the scene of its fight for survival as it comes under threat from a new predator.

In the company of Rob Llewellyn-Smith I was able to travel by boat around the extensive mangroves at Dayah (WA28) Ras al Khaimah on 8 March. This is a site where Sykes warbler has been collected in the past. Unfortunately I heard none. There were plenty of clamorous warblers singing at the site.

**Reference:** ● Castell, P. 1999. Clamorous reed warbler *Acrocephalus stentoreus* apparently predated nest of booted warbler *Hippolais rama* in the United Arab Emirates. *Sandgrouse* 21(2):177-178.

Michael Jennings

### The OSME Regional List (ORL)

The Voous order of birds (Voous, 1977) has had a good run, having been the accepted order in the Palearctic region through the 1980s and 1990s and followed by many major works, such as BWP, and has been used by ABBA during the data collection phase. However, like all good things, it came to an end and, by the 1990s, cracks were starting to appear in its structure, mainly through DNA based research which pointed to different species relationships under phylogenetic concepts rather than more subjective morphological studies used previously.

The expansion of the Ornithological Society of the Middle East area of interest to include central Asia has generated a need for a new agreed regional working list of birds names. This need, coupled with the 'new order' of birds taxonomy such as that published in Dickinson (2003), will result in a comprehensive ORL. It will include English names that follow, with very few divergences, the report of Gill & Wright (2006), the result of a 12-year International Ornithological Congress global project.

The aim of the ORL is to provide a definitive list of bird species that have been recorded in the OSME Region. A 'consultation draft' is published on the OSME Website ([www.osme.org](http://www.osme.org)) as a first step towards that goal. The OSME working party (comprised of Richard Porter, Simon Aspinall, Mike Blair and Steve Preddy) would welcome any comments, corrections and suggestions to improve it. Email: [ed@osme.org](mailto:ed@osme.org). A subsequent goal is the development of a country-by-country checklist for the OSME Region. During the compilation of the ORL, Edward Dickinson and Kees Roselaar have kindly given advice on some taxonomic developments that will be included in *Howard & Moore 4<sup>th</sup> edition*.

### Future ABBA list of Arabian birds

The ABBA breeding bird list has allocated a numerical reference to each species which relates to its systematic position in accordance with the Voous order. The Voous list was, when the ABBA project started, just the last of a long line of systematic orders, all in their time thought by many to be the definitive order. Its unlikely that the Howard and Moore list or the ORL will be the last word either.

When the atlas is published the database will continue but the now creaking Voous order will have to be replaced, probably following the ORL. For data processing requirements, whatever list is chosen needs to be translated into a numerical sequence relating to systematic order, probably identifying birds to sub-species.

The actual change to a new series of species numbers is not a big problem but ideas on how to do this or on what might be an appropriate numbering system for the future of ABBA would be welcomed. Perhaps a common species numbering system can be agreed with other ornithological databases operating in the region?

**References:** ● Dickinson, E C (Ed). 2003. *The Howard and Moore complete checklist of the birds of the world*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Christopher Helm, London. UK. ● Gill, F & W Wright. 2006. *Birds of the World: Recommended English Names*. Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, USA/Christopher Helm. London. UK. ● Voous, K H. 1977. *List of Recent Holarctic*

## Survey of Kentish plovers on Hawar island, June 2006

by Howard King

The Hawar Islands (QB28) are an archipelago of over thirty islands situated 26 km south-east of Bahrain and lie close to the Ras Abrouq peninsula north of Dukhan, Qatar. The main island of Hawar has an area of 38.7 km<sup>2</sup> and is the only one with human occupation. The government of Bahrain is currently studying tourism development plans for the western shore of the main island and the planned proposals include several beachfront hotels and eco holiday villages along with supporting infrastructure developments. An assurance has been given that the restricted access and protected status for the other islands will be maintained.

The western shore of the main island has not been thought of as being of any great ornithological importance, the significant breeding colonies of sea birds are all on the other islands. However the western coastal zone of the Hawar is valuable for its resident breeding species such as larks and notably the Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* even though numbers were thought to be small. In view of the Bahrain Government's development proposals I decided to carry out a survey of the western part of the island to try to obtain more information on the population of Kentish plover.

This side of the main island is characterised by an almost continuous strip of coastal halophytic vegetation, low bushes that have grown up over the beach ridges. The density of the scrub is variable but cover is more than 30% of the ground surface. The width of this scrub varies considerably from about twenty to several hundred metres from the shore line, except in a few places previously utilised by the local defence forces and within the hotel and beach chalet compounds, where there is no scrub. The shoreline itself is characterised by shallow water, beach rocks, a small but steep shell and sand beach and numerous beach ridges, containing prodigious quantities of flotsam, seagrasses, soft sponges and the remains of algal mats, that are continuously deposited by the natural drift along the entire shore. A large mix of the usual floating jetsam from the Gulf of Bahrain now also litters this beach line. Foraging Kentish plover are a common sight feeding along the line of decaying detritus, which gets mixed in with the sandy material of the beach. A coastal track runs roughly parallel to the shoreline 10-50 m inshore of the beach.

Variable numbers of waders and shore birds totalling 38 species have been observed on this coast with the largest numbers being present in September/October and March/April. The coast from the southern tip of Hawar to the jetty in the north, is a distance of 25.4 km along the shore. It has a tidal range of less than 1.5 m. Counts from September to April in 2001/2002 along 5 km of shoreline near the existing hotel returned on average in excess of 600 birds of 28 species (excluding terns). The highest monthly count for Kentish plover was 96 (December 2001) the lowest 45 (January 2002). White-cheeked terns *Sterna repressa* congregate in the same area during September and October with numbers totalling on occasions over 7,500 birds. In contrast, by the end of May when most wader species have disappeared and terns and herons are at their breeding colonies, the shoreline becomes the



sole domain of the Kentish plover. This creates a unique opportunity to undertake a survey of the species numbers. The coastline was previously investigated for breeding species in July 1998. During that survey indicative evidence of Kentish plover breeding was noted with numerous young seen.

Prior to the survey egg dates reported for breeding Kentish plovers on Bahrain were from late February to late May (ABBA records). A preliminary drive-by survey along the entire coastal track had indicated that most Kentish plovers were found in or close to the limit of the vegetation line on the shore. It was also observed that the species establishes small territories about the nest site and has a tendency to retain occupation as the chicks become mobile and to some time after fledging. It was determined that by walking the entire coastline, during the first half of June, when the majority of chicks were mobile and, few if any other waders were present, it would be relatively easy to identify and count family groups within their territories as a means of estimating breeding numbers. This subsequently proved to be the case.

The entire coastline was walked and surveyed in both directions, from 5-15 June 2006, a vehicle was used for the afternoon pickup or morning drop off with a preferred start time before 6 am. Observations were made using both a telescope and binoculars, a GPS location was taken for each group of birds found. With daytime temperatures peaking up to 45° C and humidity ranging from 27% to 88%, the maximum distance covered on any single day was only 12.5 km.

During the survey the plovers, particularly the chicks, proved extremely obliging. Calls between adults and chicks or movement ahead on the beach from foraging adults or scurrying chicks would always give away the next group position. Once encountered it was always necessary to detour the route inshore to ensure that counted birds were always kept behind. Observations were made from a distance of each group found to determine status and composition. Without exception at least one adult and usually both were generally found close to the location of the chicks, the adults on the beach foraging, the chicks more often amongst the beach ridges, detritus or vegetation behind. Given that the aim was not to put birds to flight, the exact ratio of fledged young present was not determined however the number of obviously unfledged chicks was noted.

Family groups were mainly identified by the presence of a single adult male. In all 66 pair/groups with young or chicks were found. This total included only five multiple family groups identified by the presence of more than one adult male. Two active nests each with three eggs and two empty nests were also located.

The nests with eggs were found purely by chance in very open ground. On neither occasion was a displaying adult encountered close by but adults were observed on the adjacent beach foraging for food. In addition to the 66 family groups three solitary adult males were found. There were a total of 125 young of various ages in the 66 family groups. Groups were encountered at 61 locations spread along 25.4 km of shore, of which 21.7 km provides suitable breeding habitat. About the Hawar Archipelago as a whole it is thought that approximately another 40 km of coastline is comparable to the western shore of the main island. However the Kentish plover has also been recorded as breeding at numerous other locations, often in isolation. Based on the survey results and in consideration of all other observations taken since

1998, the total breeding population for Kentish plover throughout the Hawar Archipelago is conservatively estimated at about 200 pairs.

No evidence of tern or heron species breeding was found in the area surveyed in June 2006.

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## The 2006 UAE Empty Quarter Shorebird Survey

By Simon Aspinall

An Empty Quarter Shorebird Survey Team may not expect to get a huge productivity bonus, but the opportunity during 16-17 February 2006 to visit the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oilfield Operations, Shah oilfield (TA22) in the UAE's sector of the Empty Quarter, is always worth taking. Shah hosted the UAE's fourth record of Namaqua dove *Oena capensis* in far-off February 1990, just two years after the species' first occurrence and which has since been confirmed breeding in the country.

At Shah camp there may not have been any Namaqua doves this time, but laughing doves *Streptopelia senegalensis* were doing well, with many tens of pairs present. The greening of the gardens around the ADCO accommodation complex over the past ten years has proven a real boon both to this species and to house sparrows *Passer domesticus*, which also arrived of their own volition, and now also to white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* which were originally released here. Shah lies some 30 km across sand desert from the nearest cultivations, rural or urban housing in the Liwa crescent, a distance possibly too far for the bulbuls to have arrived unassisted. This species of bulbul, it should be remembered, is a successful introduction to the UAE in the first place.

That was about all that was expected to be found here by way of nesting species, but the brown golf course, laid out on the salty flats at the foot of the 100 m high barren dunes, produced a surprise find; nesting Kentish plovers *Charadrius alexandrinus*. Pools, sorry, water hazards, present in depressions excavated only a metre or so down to the hyper-saline water table are clearly attractive to this species. Two nest-scrapes were located, one of them observed being constructed by a female plover in February. At least three, possibly four, females and two agitated males were present close-by.

The mapped breeding distribution of this species, Kentish plover, is dominantly coastal in Arabia, as mostly elsewhere, but includes inland saline wetlands in Oman and Saudi Arabia. These records from Shah, which itself lies about 150 km from the coast as the crow flies, constitute a first confirmed nesting attempt this far inland in Abu Dhabi.

Shah may be a far cry from the sandy coast of Kent, UK, but had Kentish plover been found and first described from the Empty Quarter who knows what its common name might have been.

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# Satellite Tracking of Greater Flamingos from the UAE

By Salim Javed & Shahid Khan

In November 2005, five greater flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* were captured at the al Wathba Wetland Reserve in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. All the five birds were marked with Darvic rings and four of them were fitted with satellite transmitters. This is the first such instance of satellite tagging of greater flamingos in the Arabian Peninsula.

One of the main objectives of the study was to establish the origin of birds wintering in the UAE and document migration routes and stopover sites. Additionally, we wanted to understand the local movement patterns and use of different types of wetlands within the emirates.

Of the four birds, two adult birds successfully migrated across the Arabian Gulf into Iran. The first bird (BHTA), an adult female started its return migration on 27 February from the al Aryam coast in Abu Dhabi and moved eastward to Khor Dubai and then to Khor al Beida in Umm al Qaiwain. After stopping over for a few days at the site it crossed the Gulf possibly on 3 March 2006, as the first locations in Iran were obtained on 4 March 2006 from Nariz Lake, about 90 km east of Shiraz. It then moved further north into the Caspian Sea area of Iran and then further into Turkmenistan where it stayed until early September before heading south again. The bird returned to UAE in the first week of December to Ras al Khor and is currently (23 December 2006) at Khor al Beida. During its entire spring migration event until it reached the northernmost point the bird had covered about 2,500 km.

Another adult bird (BHTF) migrated across the Gulf from the Abu Dhabi coast on 11 April, in possibly a single hop, covering 566 km. The bird spent the entire summer at Nariz Lake in southern Iran before returning on 9 August 2006, again flying directly across the Gulf to land in Shahama Lake, east of Abu Dhabi Island, covering approximately the same distance it travelled during spring migration.

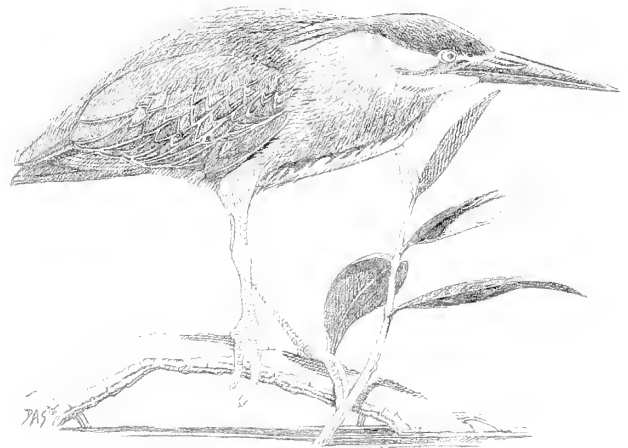
The four satellite transmitter fitted birds have further given very useful data on local movements and use of different wetlands in the country. Local use of wetlands was highly variable for the four birds; however all of them spent time at key wetland sites in the emirates. BHTA, used five different wetlands in the emirates from Abu Dhabi to Ras al Khaimah and made several inter-site movements before spring migration in March 2006. The other two immature birds (BHTP and BHTB), which spent the entire summer in the UAE, also used five different wetlands in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Umm al Qaiwain. BHTF used only three wetlands, all in Abu Dhabi Emirate. Other than al Wathba and Shahama lakes, both in Abu Dhabi, all four birds predominantly used inter-tidal areas on the coast.

Data from the satellite tracked flamingos have led to documentation of migration routes, stopover sites and local use of wetlands in the Emirates. These flamingos will continue to be monitored, however initial results obtained from the study indicate that urgent conservation is needed to ensure long-term protection of key inter-tidal areas along the coast of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Umm al Qaiwain and Ras al Khaimah. These should be priority conservation actions not only for the flamingos but many other waterbirds using these areas. Some of these sites such as Khor al

Beida, an Important Bird Area (IBA) and a major wintering area for Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola* are under serious threat from proposed development projects. Quick intervention and stronger inter-emirate cooperation is needed to protect such vital bird habitats in the country.

The flamingo uses many wetlands, both inland and coastal in Iran and Turkmenistan, and also demonstrates the need to establish mechanisms for enhanced regional cooperation among the neighbouring countries of the Gulf to conserve migratory birds and their flyway habitats.

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There were two records of the striated heron *Butorides striatus* from the Qatar east coast (RB28 & RB27) in May and September 2006, one was a juvenile (Andrew Bailey and Gordon Saunders). First records for Qatar.

## Bald Ibis Movements tracked by Satellite to Arabia

Satellite tracking of migratory birds has been one of the most exciting developments in the study of migration in the last decade or so. Transmitters are getting cheaper and smaller and perhaps one day we can look forward to even small passerines recording their whereabouts for the world during their winter sojourn.

Satellite telemetry has already shown us how wintering Arabian houbaras go to China and back for the summer and some of the larger raptors wandering around in Arabia in winter are from as far afield as Georgia (page 14). We now have the exciting prospect of being able to check in real time the wintering progress of northern bald ibises from the remaining eastern colony in Syria.

Three ibises were fitted with transmitters in early July near Palmrya, Syria. They left the area on 17 July. On 18 July they were in Jordan and proceeded to travel quickly down the western highlands of Saudi Arabia, which with stopovers they transited about 21-25 July. They were then in Yemen a couple of weeks prompting thoughts of a resurgence of the ornithological bird tour industry to Yemen. This was short-lived as they then crossed the Red Sea and from 18 August were apparently at their permanent wintering grounds at 2,600 m in the Ethiopian highlands.

A posting on 7 October by Can Bilgin provided the news that 'Last week, an expedition organized by BirdLife Ethiopia found

the three tagged birds and another one alive and well at a remote site near Debre Birhan in Ethiopia. Çagan Sekercioglu, a member of the team, took pictures of the birds next to a lake at about 2,600 m. More information on their wintering site can be found in the December 2006 issue of BirdLife's 'World Birdwatch' magazine.

Those wishing to follow the progress of these birds back to Syria in spring should check-out the RSPB website [http://www.rspb.org.uk/tracking/northern\\_bald\\_ibis.asp](http://www.rspb.org.uk/tracking/northern_bald_ibis.asp).

## Announcements

### Friends of Socotra

The Friends of Socotra rationale is to bring together people with a background in scientific research and those with more general interests and develop the synergies between them. By so doing FOS hopes to promote sustainable use and conservation of the natural environment of the Socotra island group; raise awareness of the archipelago's biodiversity, the unique culture and language of the islanders and help improve the quality of life of the island communities.

FOS has recently brought out an updated checklist of birds of Socotra, which can be found at their website: [WWW.FriendsofSocotra.org](http://WWW.FriendsofSocotra.org).

FOS also publishes a regular newsletter *Tayf* which has a good selection of news and notes on the flora and fauna of Socotra. Email FOS at [friendsofsoqotra@aol.com](mailto:friendsofsoqotra@aol.com).

### Owl Pellets Wanted by Mammalogists

Did you know that there are a whole band of people out there who are just dying to get their hands on owl pellets. A big cache of owl pellets are the mammalogical equivalent of landing on a remote and unknown seabird island - you never know what you are going to find. Pellets are very often the only source of evidence to the existence of some rodents and other small species in a given area. For example the only record of the Etruscan Shrew *Suncus etruscus* on Bahrain is from a barn owl pellet. If you find any owl pellets and would like to know what they have been eating please contact Mike Jordan on email: [m.jordan@chesterzoo.co.uk](mailto:m.jordan@chesterzoo.co.uk) for details of where you can send them. ABBA would also very interested in the results so please report details.

## Arabian Bird Calendar: 2007

The Eriksens have produced a 2007 bird calendar for Arabia. It can be seen on their website at [www.birdsoman.com](http://www.birdsoman.com). The cover is of a desert eagle owl sitting on a sloping sand dune. The price for the calendar is UK£5 which includes airmail postage. Those interested can contact Hanne and Jens direct at [hjoman@eim.ae](mailto:hjoman@eim.ae).

## Planning a birding trip to Yemen?

Contact Yousef Mohageb of Arabian Ecotours for all your needs: car hire, accommodation, bird sites, groups or individuals. [AET@Y.Net.Ye](mailto:AET@Y.Net.Ye); Tel 967 1821 120; Fax 967 1326 134; PO Box 5420, Sana'a, Yemen.

## ABBA and Phoenix Notes and Notices

**Ordering Phoenix** Please ask if you would like an invoice or a receipt. *Phoenix* is not available through agents.

**Contributions to Phoenix** *Phoenix* is published annually and contains papers, reports, correspondence and announcements submitted by contributors to the ABBA project and those interested in Arabian birds. Papers are not independently refereed but every effort is made to ensure that content is accurate. However the views expressed by authors are not necessarily shared by the Editor or the sponsors of *Phoenix* and the ABBA project. Articles relevant to the aims of the ABBA project are welcomed, especially notes on new breeding birds, the avifauna of specific areas or studies concerning particular species. Notices of reports and publications etc and requests for information are included free of charge. Articles may be emailed, submitted on disk, typed or handwritten. Charges for commercial advertisements and loose inserts are available on request.

**Records still needed** The ABBA project is nearing an important stage with the publication of the Atlas. However the database will continue to be added to even after publication and the data made available to anyone who needs information on Arabian birds or the region. Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Co-ordinator. Old records are especially valuable in assessing population changes and range expansions and contractions. Although the project concerns resident and breeding species, it is



All mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* breeding in Arabia are thought to be feral. A female with ten young about two weeks old, were seen near Dhahran (QA29), 4 May 2006. (Andrew Drummond-Hill)



not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon breeding species, are also very valuable. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2006 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. All potential contributors will be sent full instructions on how to submit records, ABBA recording forms, breeding birds list etc, can be found at the ABBA website: <http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>.

**How to obtain *Phoenix*** One issue of *Phoenix* is published each year. It is issued free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is sent to recent correspondents. A bundle of each issue is also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia. It is available on subscription for a single payment of £25 (€35/US\$45) for the next five issues, i.e. Nos 24-28 inclusive, or by an annual standing order for Sterling bank accounts. Because of excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling (£), Euros (€) or US dollar banknotes, or the equivalent in other foreign currency notes. Subscribers will notice that their address label includes a number which indicates the last number of *Phoenix* they have subscribed to. Would subscribers please send in their new subscription before their old sub runs out to avoid the time and expense of reminders. Free copies for those in Arabia and regular correspondents may be discontinued without warning - so to ensure you get a copy of each issue please think about subscribing. Back issues of *Phoenix* (Nos 1-22) are available at £2/€3/US\$4 each (or the whole set for £30/€45/US\$55) including postage. Those leaving Arabia might be interested in placing a subscription order as the price represents a small sum for all the news of Arabian birds for five years. Will subscribers please remember to advise of any future change of address.

**The *Phoenix*** This newsletter is covered by the *Zoological Record*. Articles and information in *Phoenix* may be freely reproduced for scientific or non-profit purposes, provided appropriate acknowledgement is given to authors, the ABBA project and its sponsors. Views expressed by authors, including the position of international boundaries on maps or reference to same in the text, do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor or the project sponsors. Articles in this issue are by the Editor unless shown otherwise.

**ABBA Website** (<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>)

The ABBA website is long overdue a revision but unfortunately there will be no time to do that until the ABBA manuscript is completed. In the meantime the site does provide

- An introduction to the ABBA project.
- Instructions to those wishing to contribute records and the forms to use. It includes a list of Arabian breeding birds with short notes on the status and distribution of each.
- A bibliography of many hundreds of references to Arabian birds. This can be used as a search tool for species, subjects and places (This bibliography is updated each year - get the most recent update from [arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com)).
- Index to previous *Phoenix* issues.
- *Phoenix* subscriptions and items for sale.
- Digital images from ABBA surveys.

## More news of Meinertzhagen's misdeeds

Readers of *New Yorker* magazine were recently treated to a very interesting article on the deeds and particularly the misdeeds of Richard Meinertzhagen, he of '*Birds of Arabia*'. In May 2006 a detailed account of the nefarious activities of this complex and, now it is revealed, very corrupt man, has been put together by John Seabrook. For many years, many people thought Meinertzhagen had done a great service to the study of Arabian ornithology but it now transpires he has actually done a great disservice to the study of birds, not just in Arabia but in many other parts of the world including Europe and India. In fact most of the places he visited.

According to Seabrook, Meinertzhagen had been caught stealing bird specimens from the Bird Section of the Natural History Museum, London (now at Tring), as long ago as 1919 and had been banned from the museum for a few years. Later after being readmitted he was again caught stealing specimens in 1934 and 1935. He also removed books from the museum library and tore pages out of others. For reasons best known to the museum this activity was all quietly swept under the carpet.

Perhaps the first to blow the whistle on Meinertzhagen was Knox (1993) in a paper in *Ibis*, who pointed out that Meinertzhagen had fraudulently re-labelled redpoll specimens he had stolen from other collections and replaced them with his own labels with new dates and localities. This revelation started a snowball rolling that has since obliterated Meinertzhagen's reputation. A subsequent major review of Meinertzhagen material involving Robert Prys-Jones the head at Tring, Pamela Rasmussen of the Smithsonian Institution and Nigel Collar of ICBP took a long careful look at a whole series of Meinertzhagen specimens from south Asia. In a number of forensic tests, including the x-raying of specimens to examine bird skin preparation techniques not apparent on a superficial examination, they found that Meinertzhagen's thieving and specimen frauds had been practised on a large, probably very large, scale. Seabrook lists many specimens where Meinertzhagen had removed original labels and added a label for his own collection with new collection data. One of the most celebrated frauds was the Indian forest owlet *Athene blewitti* which Meinertzhagen claimed to have shot in 1914, 300 miles (480 km) from the spot the only previous ones had been collected in 1884. On X-ray the specimen proved to have been one of the group originally collected in 1884. In a strange twist to the story Rasmussen herself collected the next forest owlet specimen in the 1990s, not far from the original collection site. Meinertzhagen's motive can only be guessed at but probably it was a mixture of the warped objectives some collectors get and a desire to be held in the eye of the ornithological establishment as one of its pre-eminent members. It also seems he may have taken a lot of pleasure in just fooling everyone.

It transpires that Meinertzhagen did not confine his fraud to ornithological work, Seabrook also shows that he made up a good part of his contribution to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century history and his military career, including a clumsy attempt to discredit the achievements of T E Lawrence. This is all to be revealed in another major biography coming along soon. There have been two biographies to date but both rather glowing towards Meinertzhagen, which appears to be a condition put on the use of Meinertzhagen's personal papers (in the Bodleian Library Oxford) by the family who control access to them. My own recent request to see Meinertzhagen's diary notes from Arabia would only have

been permitted if the family retained the veto on anything I published about them. Not an acceptable restraint on research in my view.

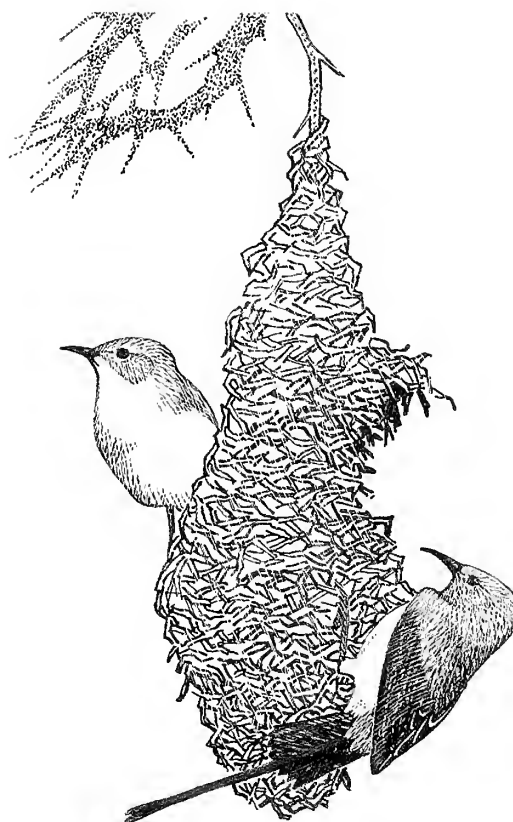
Where does this wholesale fraud leave Arabian ornithology and 'Birds of Arabia'. No one has had time yet to do a thorough check of Meinertzhagen's Arabian specimens or just as importantly, review whether there is any correlation between Meinertzhagen suspect skins and missing skins at Tring. This will only be found by comparing the museum accession registers to the current collections. Suffice to say that in my own several visits to Tring I have not found any obvious discrepancies that might be put down to his fraud. I am however concerned about a few of his Arabian specimen records and much more about the detail in *Birds of Arabia*. For much of the detail in his book there is simply no documented evidence to back it up. Meinertzhagen had a huge collection of some 20,000 bird specimens (which eventually went to the Natural History Museum) but there are hardly any documents to go with the collection and Meinertzhagen appears never ever to have written any field notes or compiled data sheets.

There is a huge diary at Oxford which he maintained throughout his life but that has been retyped several times and was by all accounts 'improved' on each retype. The diary has now become 'Exhibit A' in the case against him. With nothing substantial to back up statements in *Birds of Arabia* a lot of his notes on the biology of Arabian birds, their breeding and notes on habits, habitat, food etc become very suspect. Often the notes have been taken from other standard works, sometimes maybe they were his own recollections but not necessarily about Arabia. I have also come to the conclusion that he just made up facts to fill gaps in his text. When criticised in a review of his book for apparent errors in it, such as the number of eggs laid by a cream-coloured courser *Cursorius cursor* (Pitman, 1955), it seems he made up more data to silence the criticism (Meinertzhagen, 1955).

The question is how should a once highly regarded book now be viewed? Some will say that as he is a proven liar, thief and fraudster then nothing in his Arabian tome can now be believed, others will say surely some of it is worthwhile, especially where he gives lots of detail of some particular ornithological event? But those instances might just be bigger more complicated lies. I tend to take the view that the book is now completely compromised as a reference of any merit. The public has already reappraised his work in a purely commercial way. A friend recently told me he had bought a copy of *Birds of Arabia* for £80 at an auction. He kicked himself as his was the only bid! That particular copy was inscribed with personal correspondence between Meinertzhagen and David Bannerman and a few years ago it would have fetched ten times as much.

**References:** ● Knox, A. 1993. Richard Meinertzhagen, - a case of fraud examined. *Ibis* 135: 320-325. ● Meinertzhagen, R. 1954. *Birds of Arabia*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh & London. ● Meinertzhagen, R. 1955. (Notes on a review of "Birds of Arabia"). *Ool. Rec.* 29: 35-36. ● Pitman, C R S. 1955. *Birds of Arabia* by Colonel R. Meinertzhagen, 1954. *Ool. Rec.* 29:27-30. ● Rasmussen, P C & N J Collar. 1999. Major specimen fraud in the Forrest Owlet *Heteroglaux (Athene auct.) blewitti*. *Ibis* 141:11-21 ● Seabrook, J. 2006. Ruffled feathers - uncovering the biggest scandal in the bird world. *The New Yorker* 29 May 2006: 50-61

Michael Jennings



Larger than usual numbers of Nile Valley sunbird *Anthreptes metallicus* wintered at Thumrait (UA12), southern Oman, during 2005/6 with some 20 birds still present in mid February. A pair remained all of March and the female became elusive at the end of the month, probably on eggs. Breeding was confirmed on 18 April when two juveniles were observed being fed by adults. The short-tailed recently fledged young birds had clean lemon yellow underparts and pale grey uppers. They could be easily located by their high pitched 'si' or 'sit' calls. The male had moulted and lost his long tail feathers by 12 April. The young had become quite independent by 2 May and the adults were going around together again as if they may start a second brood. They did not breed again and the female went missing later on (Steve Tibbett).

## Arabian Buzzard Taxonomy

At least four *Buteo* taxa occur in Arabia. The Eurasian Buzzard *B. buteo* which is found from the Atlantic islands to Japan, is represented by the migratory Steppe Buzzard *B. b. vulpinus*, which passes through Arabia in large numbers. Weleh & Welch (1988) recorded up to 100,000 entering Africa across the Bab al Mandab in autumn. Two subspecies of the Long-legged Buzzard *B. rufinus* also occur. The resident subspecies throughout Arabia is probably *B. r. cirtensis*, this has a range extending from north-west Africa to Arabia and has been identified as far east as the UAE. The nominate subspecies, which breeds from south-east Europe to central Asia and northern India, migrates though and winters in Arabia in small numbers, it has been collected at Taiz and at other sites. The fourth taxa is the buzzard resident on Socotra, which many observers regard as a third species and has been informally named as *B. 'socotrae'* (Clouet & Wink, 2000).

The buzzards in the Palearctic region and their relatives in Africa, are a phylogenetically young but morphologically variable group, a situation which has caused a number of taxonomical problems and some widely varying opinions. At one extreme, Kruckenhauser et al (2004) suggested that under a strict application of the biological species concept all four taxa mentioned above could be viewed as representatives of just one

species, *B. buteo*. Although under the phylogenetic species concept, considering also morphological data, the maintenance of *B. rufinus* at species level seemed justified to those authors, they left open the position of the Socotra Buzzard. At the other extreme various authors have at times regarded all four taxa as separate species. (*Vulpinus* is also often regarded as a full species, separate from *Buteo buteo*, small number s of which are reported from Arabia in winter).

Kruckenhauser et al (2004) also commented that although plumage characteristics of the Long-legged Buzzard subspecies *B. r. cirtensis* and *B. r. rufinus* are similar, the nominate subspecies may actually be closer genetically to the Upland Buzzard *B. hemilasius*, found from Tibet to Mongolia and wintering to the south. This concurs with the older view that *hemilasius* is a subspecies of *B. rufinus*. However today it is generally regarded as a monotypic species forming a superspecies with *B. rufinus* (del Hoyo et al 1994).

When the local buzzard was first collected on Socotra in 1898 (Forbes, 1903) it was determined as *B. desertorum*, which is an obsolete synonym of *B. b. vulpinus* (Steppe Buzzard). Although isolated and sedentary, the Socotra buzzard was never named as a separate taxon, which has, to some extent, hampered later workers in considering it as a separate entity, either at species or subspecies level. The relationships of this taxon to other buzzards has been much discussed and the position is still not settled. Clouet & Wink (2000) pointed out that its genetic make up was identical to *Buteo b. bannermani* found on the Cape Verde islands. Those authors also found a closer genetic relationship to *B. rufinus* than to *B. buteo*, confirming the earlier morphological conclusions of others. Clouet & Wink (2000) remarked that according to the phylogenetic species concept the Cape Verde Buzzard could be considered as a separate species, *B. bannermani* and that the Socotra Buzzard, because of its identical genetic make up, could also be called *B. bannermani*. Alternatively it could be given specific status in view of its obvious geographical isolation.

The theory of how these two island taxa came to be identical genetically yet so isolated from one another required a population of 'Protobuteo' to have occupied continental Africa before the formation of the Sahara desert during the Pleistocene. The two island populations and *B. rufinus* became isolated prior to the separation of the Mountain Buzzard *B. oreophilus* in Africa and Steppe Buzzard *B. b. vulpinus* in Eurasia. Clouet and Wink (2000) showed that both the latter were genetically closer to nominate *B. buteo* than *bannermani*, 'socotrae' and *rufinus*. They pointed out that the Eurasian/African buzzard complex is very young and evolved during only the last 300,000 years with divergence between the island taxa and *rufinus* starting only 90,000 years ago. Genetically this is no time at all and supports the suggestion of Kruckenhauser et al (2004) that according to the biological species concept all these buzzards might be viewed as one species.

Despite the taxonomic arguments most people who have seen the Socotra Buzzard find it to be quite different from all other buzzards occurring in Arabia, all it lacks is a name. This situation may not continue for much longer as Richard Porter and Ian Sinclair are examining this taxon with a view to formally naming it. They would appreciate any comments on these matters from readers.

**References:** ● Clouet, M & M Wink. 2000. The buzzards of Cape Verde *Buteo (buteo) bannermani* and Socotra *Buteo (buteo) spp.*: First results of a genetic analysis based on nucleotide sequences of the cytochrome b gene. *Alauda* 68(1):55-58. ● del Hoyo, J, A Elliot & J Sargatal (eds). 1994. *Handbook of the Birds of the World Vol 2*. Lynx Edicions. Barcelona. ● Forbes, H O. 1903. *The Natural History of Sokotra & Abd el Kuri*. Henry Young & Sons. London. ● Kruckenhauser, L, E Haring, W Pinsker, M J Riesing, H Winkler, M Wink & A Gamauf. 2004. Genetic vs. morphological differentiation of old world buzzards (genus *Buteo*, Accipitridae. *Zoologica Scripta* 33:197-211. ● Welch G & H Welch. 1988. The autumn migration of raptors and other soaring birds across the Bab al Mandeb straits. *Sandgrouse* 10: 26-50.

Michael Jennings

## Lappet-faced Vultures Nesting on a Rock

by Peter J Mundy and Michael C Jennings

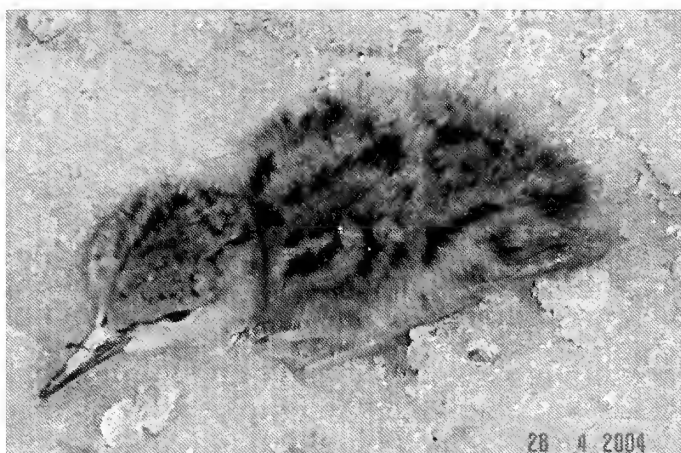
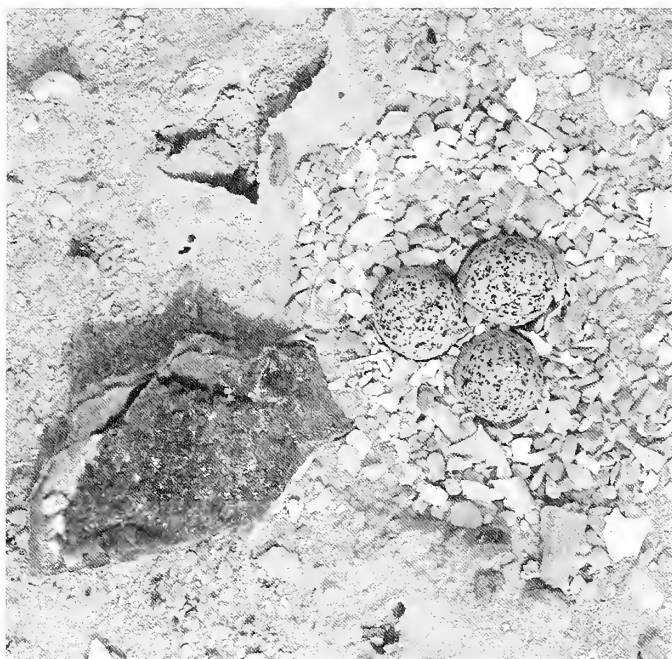
One of the most dramatic discoveries of the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia (ABBA) project has been in finding that the lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* is a "widespread, often common, breeding" species in the peninsula (Jennings 1995). All nests of the bird have been in trees, except for one "on a rock pinnacle". This unique instance merits a full description, which is the purpose of the present note.

In April and May 1992, MCJ visited the north-western corner of Saudi Arabia (ABBA Survey 12), in the Jebal Tubaiq area between Jordan and the Great Nafud. He had just seen a cinereous vulture *Aegypius monachus* on 27 April, itself an exciting record, when he espied in the distance two large dark birds standing together at a nest on top of a small pinnacle of sandstone (DA36). They turned out to be lappet-faced vultures. Unfortunately the pinnacle was unclimbable, so the top had to be viewed horizontally from a nearby site, and again unfortunately it was not possible to see into the nest.

The huge nest was right on top of the rock, on its 'crown' as it were, just as if the rock were a tree. There were many mutes on the pinnacle, but not clumped enough, we think, to have been produced by a nestling. But there were certainly enough to bespeak of long occupation and possible breeding (a medium-size nestling would be expected in late April) at the site. Other nests of the Lappet-faced Vulture were found in the area, all in trees in typical fashion. In a way, this particular nest is also typical - on top of a lone pinnacle (estimated height 15 m) emerging from the surrounding wadi.

So far this is the only such instance known in the Middle East. In Africa, Swann (1930) thought the species could "nest in the lofty cliffs", and Heim de Balsac also considered that rocks could be used in Western Sahara (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962). Neither of these opinions need to be taken too seriously. More emphatically, Louette (1977) wrote that "this species was only recorded ... essentially near the rock at Waza, northern Cameroon ... according to local information, this species nested on the rock ... in 1973" (translation by ML *in litt.*). However PJM failed to see them doing so in December 1971, nor did Scholte (1998). Indeed, PJM has never seen *Torgos* even briefly perch on rocks in

(Continued on page 14).

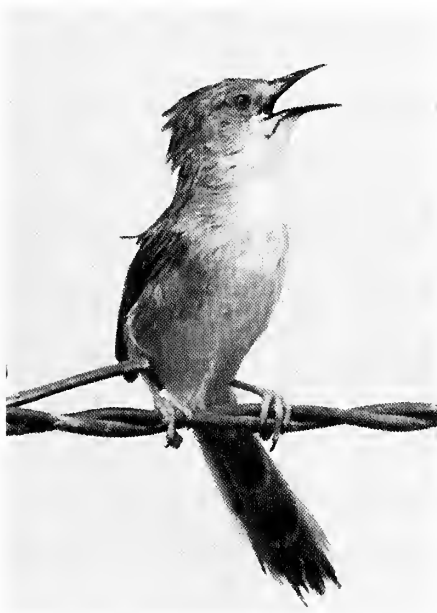


Clockwise from top left. 1. Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* nest, eggs slightly buried and pointing down and gravel chips are typical. See pages 5 & 6. (Photo: Kuwait, Khalid al Nasrallah). 2 & 3. Newly hatched chick of red-wattled plover *Hoplopterus indicus* chick and adult about to settle on eggs, Dubai. See page 15. (Photos: Mohammed Arfan Asif). 4 - 6. Some birds at Safah, (VA23) interior of northern Oman, recently hatched chick of black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, nestlings of white-cheeked bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* and Egyptian goose *Alopochen aegyptiaca*. (Photos: Peter Scott).





Clockwise from top. 1. The olive pigeon *Columba arquatrix* is still only recorded from three sites in Arabia, Jebal Souda (IA13) Saudi Arabia and near Mahwit (JB07) and Kawkaban (JB08) in Yemen. (Photo: Mahwit, January 2006, Jens and Hanne Eriksen). 2. Falcon hunters hide Ras Rakan, Qatar. From the hide a series of strings control various traps and lures, including the kestrel in foreground which is 'bait' for larger falcons. (Photo: anon). 3 & 4. Dhahran, Eastern Province, graceful warbler *Prinia gracilis* and European bee-eater *Merops apiaster* (Photos: Adrian Drummond-Hill).





southern Africa, while often seeing them fly close to cliffs.

MCJ's observation, then, is taken by us as the first properly documented instance of likely breeding by Lappet-faced Vultures on a roek.

**References:** ● Heim de Balsac, H & N Mayaud, 1962. *Les oiseaux du nord-ouest de l'Afrique*. Editions Paul Lechevalier, Paris. ● Jennings, M C. 1995. *An interim atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia*. Natl Comm. Wildl. Conserv. Development, Riyadh. ● Louette, M. 1977. *De avifauna van Kameroen en haar Zoögeografische interpretatie*. Ph.D. thesis, Universiteit Antwerpen. ● Scholae, P. 1998. Status of vultures in the Lake Chad basin, with special reference to Northern Cameroon and Western Chad. *Vulture News* 39: 3-19. ● Swann, HK. 1930. *A monograph of the birds of prey*. Vol. 1. Wheldon & Wesley, London.

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**Postscript:** The above paper is a slightly amended version of one written in 2001 which was never published. Unfortunately I have not been able to contact the first author in recent months to confirm if he wishes to make any changes before publication in *Phoenix*. It is published because a further report of a large vulture, possibly a lappet-faced vulture, seen leaving a rock pinnacle nest, was received in 2006. This report related to an observation by Andy Whittaker in the north-west of Oman, on the border with the UAE, in 1999 or 2000 and has only now come to light. The details are unfortunately vague at present but it is hoped the nest site can be checked out in the winter of 2006/7. Thanks for Gary Feulner for passing on this report. M C J.

## Colour-ringed and Wing-tagged Birds to Look Out For

Any observations of the birds bearing colour rings or wing-tags of the species mentioned below should be reported to the contacts shown. Reports should include details of the colour combinations of rings or wing tags seen, details of letters and numbers on rings and tags (and if possible the leg and wing bearing the rings/tags) plus the location, date and number of individuals observed. If no response is received to emails, further details such as postal address and telephone numbers can be provided by ABBA.

ABBA maintains a database of Arabian ringed and marked birds and a copy of observation reports would be appreciated. Details of any other rings found would also be appreciated, or can be researched if you have had problems getting details from ringing schemes.

**White and Dalmatian Pelicans** There is an ongoing colour ringing project in the Danube Delta, Romania, to study both species of pelicans breeding there. Any observations of pelicans with blue plastic rings should be sent to Attila D. Sandor (Email: attila.sandor@sor.ro, Website: [www.dalmatianpelican.ro](http://www.dalmatianpelican.ro)). You can follow the winter range of one Dalmatian pelican fitted with a satellite tracking transmitter in Romania in 2006 at [http://www.sor.ro/DP/index\\_DP\\_eng.htm](http://www.sor.ro/DP/index_DP_eng.htm).

**Flamingoes** Birds colour ringed at colonies in Iran, Turkey, Italy, France and Spain are likely to turn up in Arabia. Coloured rings will bear a combination of letters, numbers and stripes. Details to Christophe Tourenq; Email: ctourenq@erwda.gov.ae. Also in 2005 greater flamingos were captured and ringed at al Wathba in the UAE. Two adults, two immatures and a juvenile were ringed with white Darvic (plastic) rings bearing the codes BHTA, BHTB, BHTC, BHTD and BHTF. Four of these birds were also fitted with satellite transmitters. (See note on the travels of these birds at page 7).

**Imperial Eagle and Steppe Eagles.** Birds with wing tags from northern Kazakhstan have already been reported from Oman. The wing tags are in a variety of colours with a letter-number combination. White-tailed sea eagles have also been tagged in Kazakhstan. Details to Todd Katzner (Email: tkatzner@imperial.ac.uk) or Evgeny Bragin (Email: naurzum@mail.kz).

**Vultures** In recent years bearded, cinereous and griffon vultures have been fitted with satellite transmitters and most have also been colour marked. Observers who find a satellite tag or other marks on a bird that can not be assigned to one of the schemes shown below are asked to contact Dr. M. J. McGrady, Natural Research, Ltd, Am Rosenhügel 59, A-3500 Krems, Austria (Email: MikeJMcGrady@aol.com) who can research origins further.

.....**Georgia** Vultures in Georgia are being wing tagged and fitted with satellite transmitters. Wing tags have a country code, "GE". Please report sightings to Lexo Gavashelishvili (E-mail: office@gccw.org, kajiri2000@yahoo.com).

.....**Armenia** Vultures in Armenia are being wing tagged and fitted with satellite transmitters. Wing tags are blue with white lettering. Please report sightings to Mamikon Ghasabian (Email: armbirds@yahoo.com).

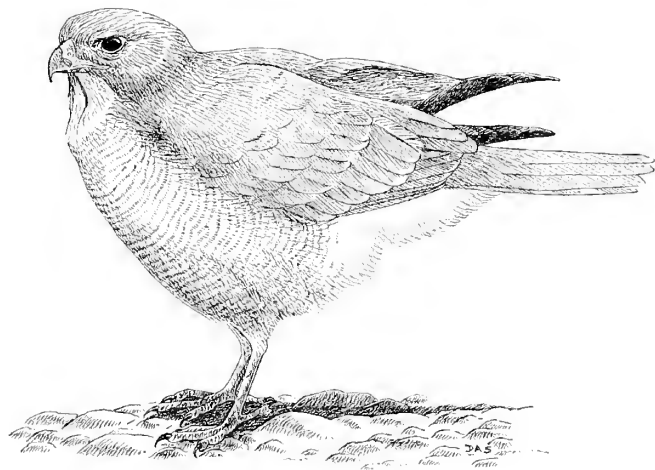
.....**Israel and Palestine** Large raptors have been colour ringed, wing tagged and fitted with transmitters in Israel and Palestine. Any sightings or recoveries of tagged birds should be sent to Ohad Hatzofe (Email: torgos@zahav.net.il)

.....**Mongolia** Cinereous vultures are being wing tagged and ringed in Mongolia, they may arrive in Arabia. So enquiries about marked birds to Georgian and Armenian researchers which are inconclusive should be sent to Nyamba Batbayar (Email: bnyamba@yahoo.com).

**Crab plovers** The Natural History Museum of Milan and the University of Pavia in conjunction with the Ministry of Fisheries in Eritrea is studying the distribution, ecology and breeding biology of the Crab Plover on Eritrean islands. Sixteen birds were trapped and colour ringed in summer 2005. Send details of sightings to Giorgio Chiozzi at the NHM Milan (Email: giorgio.chiozzi@comune.milano.it).

**Kentish plover** A study is proceeding of Kentish Plovers in the UAE at the al Wathba lake near Abu Dhabi. Details of any colour ringed birds seen should be sent to Simon Aspinall (Email: hudhud10@emirates.net.ae).

**Sociable plover** Colour ringed in breeding areas east of Lake Tengiz (50° 35' N, 70° 01' E), central Kazakhstan. Various coloured rings above the tibio-tarsal joint. Details to Dr Will Cresswell (Email: will.cresswell@st-andrews.ac.uk).



There are now up to ten pairs of shikra *Accipiter badius* breeding at about six sites around Dubai (VB27) in 2006 (Simon Aspinall, Tommy Pedersen and Kevin Hyland).

### Sharjah Conservation Workshop on Arabian Fauna

The 2006 Fauna of Arabia Conservation Workshop was hosted by the Sharjah Breeding Centre for Endangered Wildlife, 19-22 February 2006. The workshop which was the most recent of a series examining various aspects of the Arabian fauna, was organised into four specialist working groups, on freshwater fauna, small mammals, the Arabian leopard and small raptors and owls.

Delegates to the workshops were from a wealth of different backgrounds. The bird team, apart from ornithologists, included conservation specialists, wildlife managers, veterinarians, CITES officials and those involved in university research. There were representatives from every Arabian Peninsula state and Jordan. The group considered 16 species in detail, examining for each taxonomic issues, distribution in Arabia, estimated population levels and trends by state, as well as the quality and status of habitat, threats, trade and conservation status as well as recommending research that appears to be necessary for each.

The full report of the bird group can be found at Howard King's Bahrain website [www.hawar-islands.com/blog/home\\_stub.php](http://www.hawar-islands.com/blog/home_stub.php). It contains lots of information on Arabian birds of prey and owls, including distribution maps and status summaries, conservation status, the national and regional estimated population and recommendations for a range of actions identified.

The attached table shows the estimated populations of each species considered.

Any comments or suggestions on this draft populations table would be much appreciated.

Michael Jennings

### The Red Wattled Lapwings of Khor Dubai

by Mohammed Arfan Asif

Science knows them as *Hoplopterus indicus*, most of us know them as red-wattled lapwing or plovers and in India there are many other names, but the distinct and characteristic 'did he do it' call make this bird easily distinguishable to all. For some time I have been observing the behaviour of these birds and photographing them at Ras al Khor, where Dubai's lifeline creek ends in tidal flats. They are also regulars at the well maintained landscapes around the flyovers. However I have noticed in recent years that in the Dubai area the species population appears to be fast reducing which may be due to the loss of habitat through the ambitious developments going on around the creek.

Through many hours spent photographing them in a hide and being able to observe them closely I have become familiar with their breeding routines. This lapwing makes a nest on the bare ground, a slight depression, and the nest and eggs are a wonderful example of camouflage. The slightly dug nest may be decorated with shells on its outer rim and tiny pebbles matching

Estimated Populations of some Breeding Raptors and Owls in Arabia								
	Total	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	KSA	UAE	Yemen
Black-shouldered kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	15					5		10
Black kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	15005				5	5000		10000
Dark chanting goshawk <i>Melierax metabates</i>	1000					400		600
Gabar goshawk <i>Micronisus gabar</i>	200					50		150
Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i>	428					125	3	300
Long-legged buzzard <i>Buteo rufinus</i>	805			100		600	5	100
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	830	25		45	10	420	80	250
Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10152	2	30	600	20	6400	100	3000
Sooty falcon <i>Falco concolor</i>	451	16		60		300	25	50
Barn owl <i>Tyto alba</i>	960	25	10	200	10	400	15	300
African scops owl <i>Otus senegalensis</i>	24000			2000		11000		11000
Striated scops owl <i>Otus brucei</i>	3100			2500		100	500	
Eagle owl <i>Bubo bubo</i>	1490		5	110		1250	75	50
Spotted eagle owl <i>Bubo africanus</i>	4000			600		1600		1800
Little owl <i>Athene noctua</i>	5700		100	1000	100	3000	500	1000
Hume's owl <i>Strix butleri</i>	1700			300		1000		400
	69821	68	145	7520	140	31645	1303	29000

the earth. The nest site is never very far from water. I have often noticed that pairs choose nest sites which are a little raised above the surrounding ground, such as a hillock or bund. This might be a precaution against the water level rising as I have noticed that nests built farther away from the shoreline were always on sand or gravel level with the ground.

Both adults look alike with their crimson wattles and equally share the workload of nest-building. When someone approaches a nest they invariably start their frantic shrieking call but they do not take off immediately from the nest site, instead they will walk briskly in short spurts, crouching all the way and finally take off some distance from the nest. This is obviously done in order to deceive the intruder as to the whereabouts of the nest. They also mob intruders and may almost make contact with their bills.

The eggs are pointed, about 4 cm long and have mottled brown, grey and black spots on an off white base, which camouflages them well with the surroundings. I have seen full clutches of 2-4 eggs. Photographing them in the summer heat in a hide I am very aware of the need for water and so also are the lapwings as the sitting bird repeatedly takes off for the creek and returns to soak the eggs with its white underside feathers. The sitting bird also constantly rotates the egg and changes its own position in order to ensure an even temperature distribution to them. Sitting birds droop their white eyelids and may appear asleep but it remains ever vigilant to the slightest threat. At changeover of incubation the relieving bird lands about 7-8 m distant and then briskly walks to the nest crouching all the way and stopping to observe if any potential predator is around or watching. The relieved bird departs from the nest in the same manner. The partner of the sitting bird is always around to distract an intruder with its shrieking and also to give the signal to its mate to leave the nest.

I once had the special opportunity of watching and photographing the hatching of the eggs and the emergence of the chicks (photo page 12). I often was curious if the nest was ever reused but my observations suggest that it is not. However for the subsequent clutch the pair will make a new nest quite close to the old site. It seems they re-nest in a precise territory presumably agreed with other pairs nearby.

Mohammed Arfan Asif, P O Box 9115, Admin, al Wasl Hospital, Dubai, UAE. Email: arfan7@yahoo.com

## Recent Reports

The following are a selection of some interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian breeding birds (or potential breeders) received during the last year. Records are from 2006 unless noted otherwise. Please note that not all these records have been verified or accepted by local recorders. Notes after the name of the observer are editorial content and not part of the original report.

**Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*** One at the Prison pools (RA27), Qatar, 26 August, (Andrew Bailey). The species has now been seen at this site in summer several years running. Is this the next breeding site in Arabia?

**Red-billed tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*** Up to 40 excitedly calling and chasing at Raysut cliffs (TB10), Dhofar, 2 April (Graham Lobley).

**Socotra cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*** About 27,300 pairs at the Hawar colony (QB28), Bahrain, November 2005. Over 1000 nests still occupied 10 February 2006 (Howard King).

**Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*** One or two 'booming' at Sabkhat al Fasl (PA31), Eastern Province on four dates in March 1996 and 1997 (Brian Meadows).

**Yellow bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*** Another report from the Sirhan lagoon near Hadibu (UA02) Socotra in spring 2006 (Richard Porter)

**Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*** Two adults and three very young but fledged birds at Buhair (QB29), Bahrain 24 June. They were thought to have bred at mangroves at Ras Tubli 3.5 km distant (Howard King).

**Night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*** Five pairs with eight juveniles at Buhair (QB29), Bahrain, 24 June (Howard King).

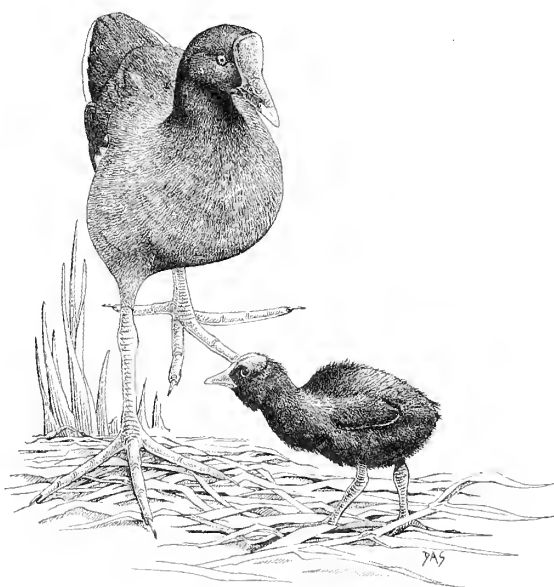
**Black-headed heron *Ardea melanocephala*** Hodeidah sewage ponds (IB06) held 19 on 13 Feb 2005 including an immature and a few sub adults (Harald Legge).

**Sacred ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*** Adult with fledged juvenile Ras Tubli (QB29), Bahrain on 17 May. There has been a free flying colony at al Areen Wildlife Park, since the 1990's and they also breed in the Emirs private estate. (Howard King). See also cattle egret note on page 2.

**Vultures** Satellite studies have shown that some of the black vultures *Aegypius monachus* and griffons *Gyps fulvus* seen in Arabia in winter are from Georgia in the Caucases. A griffon was seen in Kuwait on the Iraq border on 27 March (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Short-toed eagle *Circus gallicus*** There were 79 crossing the Bab al Mandab during a migration watch 7-11 October 2004 (Harald Legge).

**Sooty falcon *Falco concolor*** One over Khiran (OA34), Kuwait, 11 April (Andreas Hagerman).



**Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*** Small young, less than a week old, at al Wathba (UB25) Abu Dhabi, 13 January. A very early breeding with egg laying in December (Simon Aspinall).

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**Purple gallinule** *Porphyrio porphyrio* A pair over-summered 2006 at pools in central Qatar (RB27) *Sandgrouse* 28: 184-192 . On 26 August an adult was seen there with a half grown juvenile (Andrew Bailey). First Qatar records. A small population appears to be establishing in Kuwait near Doha (NB35) and up to 15 are present at Sabkhat al Fasl (PA31), in the Eastern Province (Graham Lobley). Further south near Dubai (VB27) they continue to be seen and to add confusion one has now been identified as the African subspecies *P. p. madagascariensis* (Tommy Pedersen). What that individual's role has been in the breeding at the site is not yet clear.

**Arabian bustard** *Ardeotis arabs* Four seen (2+1+1) Yemen Tihama (JA06-JA08) January and March 2005. (Harald Legge).

**Pheasant-tailed jacana** *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* Pair over-summered 2006 at pools in central Qatar (RB27), *Sandgrouse* 28: 184-192. First Qatar record.

**Spur-winged plover** *Hoplopterus spinosus* There were 110 at Hodeidah sewage ponds (IB06), 8 Jan 2005 (Harald Legge). Probably the top spot for the species in Arabia.

**Caspian tern** *Sterna caspia* About 540 at coastal wetlands near Aden (LA02), 13 January 2005 (Harald Legge).

**White-winged black tern** *Chlidonias leucopterus* About 2,000 on a flooded part of the Sabah al Ahmed Reserve (NB36), Kuwait after heavy rains (Brian Foster).

**Lichtenstein's sandgrouse** *Pterocles lichtensteinii* A nest with three eggs Nowged Plain (TA01), Socotra, 18 January (Hanne and Jens Eriksen). As with so many species the breeding season on Socotra is different to the rest of Arabia. On Socotra eggs are recorded November to March and everywhere else it is February to July.

**Koel** *Endynamys scolopacea* Singing Sunub (YA23), March 2005 (Oman Birder). Also one near the fort Bahrain (QB29), 5 May (Howard King). First on Bahrain since 1997. This species parasitises the house crow *Corvus splendens* in India - when is it going to be found breeding in Arabia?

**Forbes-watson's swift** *Apus berliozi* 100 swifts, thought to be this species circling around and very interested in Denafah or Round Island (LA02), just off Aden, 27 April (David Stanton).

**Dunn's lark** *Eremalanda dunnii* About five on Iraq border area (MB35) 16 March and several singing birds Kabd agricultural station (NB35) 29 March, Kuwait (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Bar-tailed desert lark** *Ammomanes cincturus* Recorded on eight days during a fortnight in Kuwait, March (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Temminck's horned lark** *Eremophila bilopha* Three pairs with fledged young Iraq border (MB35) 16 March, Kuwait (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Black bush chat** *Cercotrichas podobe* One Tulha (NB36), Kuwait, 27 April (Brian Foster). Second Kuwait record.

**Isabelline wheatear** *Oenanthe isabellina* Almost proved to breed again on Saiq Plateau, Jebal Akhdar (XB23) when five were present 9 June, three chasing each other, a presumed pair and one was displaying (Jens and Hanne Eriksen).

**Savi's warbler** *Locustella luscinioides* Up to three singing Doha south reedbeds (NB35) Kuwait in March (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Fan-tailed warbler** *Cisticola juncidis* About 20 or more in Wadi Mawr (JA08), Yemen Tihama, 11 May 2005 (Brian Foster)

**Red-tailed shrike** *Laninus isabellinus* On 24 March at Thumrait (UA12) four birds of the race *phoenicuroides* were present on the golf course. Two of the birds were behaving as a pair. The male sitting on a branch next to a female would sing with bill pointing up and its white throat puffed out. The female flew to the male to beg for food with shivering wings whenever he caught something, but no courtship feeding was seen. The birds had left the area later the same day. This is the first time such courtship behaviour has been seen from migrating birds in many years residence at Thumrait (Steve Tibbett).

**Woodchat shrike** *Laninus senator* Food carrying on the Saiq Plateau (XB23) Jebal Akhdar Oman, 9 June. It eventually ate the food item (Jens and Hanna Eriksen).

**Spanish sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis* Breeding colony of 100 plus pairs at Harad (PA25), Eastern Province, 24 April (Graham Lobley). In Kuwait on 17 March about 500 pairs were found nesting in several adjacent colonies in *Nitraria retusa* bushes in the Sabah al Ahmed reserve (NB36), Kuwait. On 30 March many nests in these colonies had been predated, having been torn open and the young taken. Migrant harriers were suspected. (George Gregory and MCJ).

**Pale rock sparrow** *Petronia brachydactyla* A flock of about 200 at the Sabah al Ahmed reserve (NB36) Kuwait (George Gregory and MCJ). A new national max count.

**Desert finch** *Rhodospiza obsoleta* One Ras Abrouq peninsula (QA28), Qatar, *Sandgrouse* 28: 184-192 . First Qatar record.

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## **Journals, Reports and Other Publications**

The following notes list some of the papers concerning birds and other wildlife which have appeared in the various journals and newsletters relevant to the Arabian environment in recent months. Space does not permit the full citation of each article but further information can be obtained from the various societies and organisations shown. Note that in addition to the main papers listed most periodicals also include regular features such as recent reports, brief notes etc.

### **New journal: *Podoces* - the west and central Asian ornithological journal.**

Vol 1, 2006 is the first issue of this promised twice yearly journal which aims to publish original articles on all aspect of birds in the region. 'The region' is not precisely defined but it is basically Iran and its neighbours, particularly to its north and north-east. The first issue of this A4 size journal has 82 pages. Arrangement is slightly confusing but is dictated by the bilingual approach. Articles are either in English with a Persian (Farsi) abstract or in Persian with an English abstract. The former are in the 'front' 44 pages and the latter start at the 'back' on page 45 and progress to the middle, page 82. The first article is a checklist of the (517) birds of Iran by Derek Scott updating to 2006 his previous checklists. Other major English articles concern the status of houbara in Iran, satellite tracking of winter vultures in Iran and the breeding cycle of the common swift in Eurasia. Short communications cover reports of oriental white-eye, snowy owl, Bohemian waxwing, white-headed duck and pygmy cormorant in Iran. The Persian section has main articles on two important sites in northern and north-west Iran, a wintering waterfowl census, status of imperial and great spotted eagles in southern Iran and avian cholera in the south-east Caspian region. Short communications include a survey of blue-cheeked bee-eaters and another on skylarks and crested larks feeding on oilseed rape in northern Iran. One of the journals teething problems has been the quality of the reproduced photos and the 30 or so B&W photos are unfortunately rather poor. Never-the-less everyone seriously interested in Middle East ornithology will want to subscribe.

ISSN 1735-6725. Subscription price not known. For details of how to subscribe to this journal contact Abolghasem Khaleghizadeh P O Box 1143, Karaj 31585, Iran; Email: akhaleghizadeh@yahoo.com.

### ***Wildlife Middle East* - News**

2006 saw the launch of this new newsletter dealing with Middle East wildlife with the accent on veterinarian issues and zoological collections. It is bilingual (English-Arabic) and aims to contribute



A Basra reed warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* was observed collecting hair from a dead goat (nesting material), Kuwait (NB35), 27 April 2006 (Brian Foster). There are now numerous records mostly from Kuwait of song and pairs, holding territory, as well as one bird with a brood patch. This new record suggesting nest building is the highest breeding evidence code achieved so far for the species in Arabia.



to the development of a network between zoo and wildlife professionals working in the region with the objective of being the premier source of regional information on zoo and wildlife management, husbandry and care. Categories for articles include, conservation education, environmental awareness, husbandry and nutrition, design of zoological facilities, capture and translocation techniques, wildlife diseases and preventive medicine, plus the usual review of books, research news and products. *Wildlife Middle East - News* will be published quarterly. The newsletter will be distributed to biology departments and libraries of institutes of higher education, agricultural and environmental agencies, conservation groups, wildlife projects, zoos, zoologists, veterinarians working with wild animals, veterinary hospitals involved in wildlife medicine, municipality veterinarians and pet shops. A PDF format newsletter is also available for a wider circulation to interested readers within and beyond the region.

The first issue appeared in June and the second in September 2006. Articles included so far have covered subjects as diverse as population study of captive cheetahs in the Middle East, gazelle subspecies in the Arabian peninsula, influenza vaccines in zoo collections, artificial lighting for reptiles, the Palestinian Wildlife Society and Quarantine arrangements.

A pdf can be downloaded at [www.wmenews.com](http://www.wmenews.com).

Articles are welcomed by the editors on interesting findings, news or observations. Contact [editors@wmenews.com](mailto:editors@wmenews.com).

### ***Palestine Wildlife Society Newsletter 2006 No 1***

This is the first newsletter for the year of 2006 and provides an update on the society's activities, despite the difficult times that it has faced this year due to the political situation. The society has been active with a variety of programs mainly regarding the issue of raising environmental awareness and the importance of conserving the environment and wildlife. This has been done through a variety of camps, educational activities, lectures, festivals and numerous other activities.

Further information on the PWLS and its activities can be had from their website: <http://www.wildlife-pal.org>. Email them at [wildlife@palnet.com](mailto:wildlife@palnet.com).

### ***Fauna of Arabia Vol 21 2006***

This issue contains 20 papers, two general papers, 17 on invertebrates one on vertebrates. Five papers on Arachnids include an important study of the buthid scorpions in Saudi Arabia, of which there are at least 17 species with five new ones described.

The 12 papers on insects include a review of the ladybirds of Yemen with two new species named. Papers on Yemen are well represented and include one paper on Socotra and some subject material from Somalia. The vertebrate paper is a major study of the behavioural ecology of Rüppell's fox *Vulpes ruepelli* at the Mahazat as Said reserve in west central Saudi Arabia. Individuals were trapped and 32 were fitted with radio transmitters and their movement, behaviour, diet, density, habitats, breeding, mortality and social organisation was followed for up to 21 months. Diet included a few birds, shrikes, babbler and Alaudidae but in small quantities as these foxes tend to be mostly active at night. There is one general zoological survey of the Red Sea coastal zone of

Yemen including a history of zoological research in the region. The final paper is a review of the life and achievements of John Gasperetti (1920-2001) who has studied Arabia and its wildlife for well over half a century and became an authority on its reptiles, publishing major papers on turtles, snakes and other groups as well as important contributions to the study of birds and mammals.

*Hardbound, A4 size, 490 pages. The Fauna can be ordered from: Karger Libri AG, Petersgraben 31, CH-4009 Basel, Switzerland, Website: <http://www.libri.ch/agency/services/faunaofarabia.htm> ISBN 3-929907-75-5*

### ***Zoology in the Middle East***

Abstracts of all articles published in the journal so far, starting with volume 1 (1986), are now available at [www.kasperek-verlag.de](http://www.kasperek-verlag.de). This includes contributions from no less than 676 authors from 49 countries published so far in *Zoology in the Middle East*. The first 38 volumes comprise 4912 pages in total. If you wish to obtain a copy of the publication please check for prices and other information on the web site.

In Vol 36 (2005) there were 12 main papers and 8 short communications. The only bird interest is the details of the first blackstart in Turkey. There is little of direct relevance to Arabia in this issue. Vol 37 (2006) contains papers on kestrel diet in Iran and studies on the Indian crested porcupine, the grey hamster, lesser mouse-eared bat, the discovery of the water vole in Syria. Herps papers concern pond turtles, a new snake for Syria and fire salamander in Iran. Fish subjects cover freshwater species in southern Iran and coral reefs of Jordan. There are other papers on molluscs, beetles, scorpions, mites and freshwater medusa. Vol 38 (2006) contains many papers on Iranian fauna including a new species of wood mouse of the genus *Apodemus* from Iran. There is also a note on a new species of snake from the southern Levant.

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### ***New Books***

*Phoenix* aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to birds and wildlife in Arabia or generally to the Arabian/Middle East environment. Most titles mentioned are available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number, if given. The prices shown against the following titles are published prices but may include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of contents. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money. Readers are asked to provide details of other new, relevant titles not mentioned in this survey.

## ***Socotra - A natural history of the islands and their people* by Catherine Cheung and Lyndon De Vantier (2006)**

Over a hundred years ago the first Arabian natural history book was published, it was the 700 page 'report' of a multi-disciplinary expedition to the island of Socotra and Abd el Kuri by the British Museum (Natural History) and the Liverpool Museum. This report by H O Forbes (1903) *The Natural History of Sokotra and Abd e Kuri* published by R H Porter, London, is beautifully illustrated but is exceptionally rare nowadays. After this book put the island on the map faunistically, making it the best known corner of Arabia for a short time, everything went quiet - for almost a century. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there was a minor flurry of activity about the island but it was not until Yemen reunification in the early 1990s that the island at last became accessible again to visitors. Since then there has been an explosion of scientific interest in the island and the publication of numerous books and papers about its flora, fauna and people. This new book succeeds in bringing all this research together in one cover to present the 'Galapagos of the Indian Ocean' in brilliant light, as befits such an important centre of endemism and a UNESCO Man and the Biosphere reserve. It provides a vivid insight to the many endemic plants and animals of the archipelago and the unique people and their culture on this long isolated island. There are chapters on geology, flora, fauna, birds, marine life, early settlers and visitors, the islanders, conservation and development. There are arabic summaries throughout and the whole is well referenced to a 800 item bibliography. The birds chapter covers the history of ornithological research on the island, the endemics including the endemic races in detail, migrants, seabirds, and a host of other subjects. It includes facsimiles of some of the lovely colour prints which appeared in the Forbes original. The book is complete with advice to those wishing to visit. There are some 400 colour photos plus maps and illustrations throughout. Highly recommended as a good all round introduction to the island and to its birds.

*Published by Odyssey Books and Guides, Hong Kong (Email: sales@odysseypublications.com) and available from Natural History Book Shop (Tel: +44 (0)1803 865913, Fax: +44 (0)1803 865280, email: customer.services@nhbs.co.uk, Address: 2-3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN, UK. Hardback, A4 size, 408 pages. Price UK£ 39.50. US\$ 59.95. ISBN 13: 978-962-217-770-3*

## ***The Emirates a Natural History* Edited by Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall (2005)**

Subtitled 'the wildlife of the UAE' this tome covers the whole picture of the UAE environment, mammals, birds, marine life, reptiles, insects, geology, fossils, habitats, plants and conservation. No expense has been spared in achieving the opulent standard of production, size of 270 X 330 mm, full colour throughout (580 colour photos) its 428 pages and it weighs in at 2.9 kg. This production is sponsored by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (formerly ERWDA) and a half a dozen commercial sponsors. The book is a series of essays by individual specialists (34 authors) and these are arranged in three main sections: geology which include

the fossil record; habitats, terrestrial, marine, shoreline and mangroves, and wildlife, which includes terrestrial and marine plants, invertebrates and vertebrates. There are separate sections on land reptiles, marine reptiles, amphibians, freshwater fish, marine fish, birds, land and sea mammals. A final resources section includes a checklist of main life forms in the UAE including a birds checklist, bibliographic sources, indexes etc. This is essentially an overview and introduction to the natural world in the UAE but writ large. It is perhaps too large if that's possible, and feels just a little cumbersome. People interested in birds will probably turn first to the bird section (23 pages) which is comprised of a section on the ornithological year and then two page spreads on various habitats and birds found in them, for example, town park and garden; mountain and wadi; coast and island etc. It has lots of good bird pictures and there are two and half pages of lists of all the species that have occurred in the UAE but with no details of status or number. Feral breeding exotics and non-sustaining escapes/introductions are listed. There are also bird cameos in some of the other chapters, for example 'birds in mangroves' is found in the mangrove chapter. The geology and fossil record and habitat chapters provide extremely valuable background information to birds in the UAE.

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## **Sites of Interest**

This column aims to provide details on the variety of bird habitats throughout Arabia and the representative breeding and resident birds to be found in each. The series of these site reports appearing in the issues of *Phoenix* are not intended as a kind of "where to watch birds in Arabia" or a directory to the most prolific bird sites, although a number of them are exceptionally good bird areas.

Observers are invited to write up other sites, especially those that they have studied reasonably well, drawing special attention to the breeding and resident species that occur. A site may be as small as a sewage pond or similar microsite, an urban area or as large as a whole mountain range.

A directory and location map of the 45 sites covered in *Phoenix* issues 1-20 can be seen at page 17 of *Phoenix* 21 (2005).

## **Wadi Bei / Wadi Khabb Shamsi - UAE/Oman**

The border between the Musandam peninsula, Oman and the northern UAE is essentially the high ground. There is one track over the mountains from Ras al Khaimah to the shared village of Dibba on the east coast that offers an exciting glimpse of the fauna and flora specialties of the Musandam. This track runs up the Wadi Bei from RAK to the summit plateau at about 1,000 m and down the Wadi Khabb Shamsi to Dibba.

I first made this journey in 1992 from Wadi Bei to the plateau. I was able to revisit the area for a couple of days on 27-28 February 2006, from Dibba to the Wadi Bei border post, spending a night camped on the plateau. The first thing that struck me in 2006 was that there had been no major developments on the Oman side since

1992. There had been a little development of infrastructure and improved housing for local people but the mountain had not become a concrete jungle which seems to be the lot of so many highland areas these days in Arabia. This lack of development was in great contrasts to the industrial complex that is now Ras al Khaimah.

Coming up from Dibba one passes up a narrow wadi road which is very prone to being washed away and the route is often impassable in spring. It climbs continuously first through the wadi, still flowing in many places during my visit, to the barren slopes of the highland where there are many areas of terraced agriculture. For the most part these are now abandoned. The few hill folk I saw, were all very friendly, they tended to make their living from goats and sheep. The terraces would originally have grown cereals, vegetables and fruits but there was nothing to be seen growing during my visit, except for a couple of small walled gardens which sheltered a few date and fig trees. Indigenous trees included *elb Zizyphus spinachristi*, a few date trees, acacias and *Prunus arabica* which were quite common. Several of the ancient elb trees showed signs of once having been pollarded and in days gone these trees would have provided an annual harvest of thin sticks. The hillsides were scattered with green flashes of *Euphorbia larica* and if one searched the native *Caraluma* could soon be found. Spectacular wadi and mountains scenery was available at every turn. This must be one of the best places in Arabia to see sedimentary strata lines in ancient limestone.

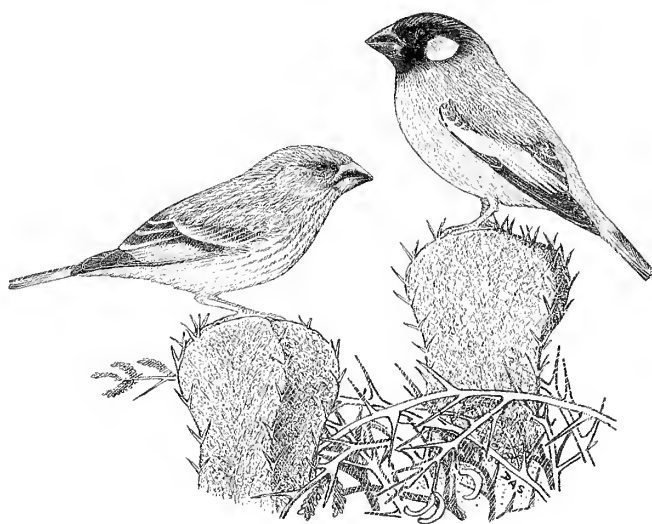
There are a few bird specialities in these hills, the one most will want to see is the chukar *Alectoris chukar* which is found at the two diagonal extremes of Arabia, here in Musandam and the extreme north-west of Saudi Arabia. I was not disappointed, six calling groups were found between 8-900 m. and then when I left the mountain on the following day I found an enormous covey of 22 at only 200 m altitude, just north of Dibba. A more accessible site for this species is the Wadi Sharm in the UAE wedge that pushes up the west side of Musandam, they can also be found there at 200 m. Perhaps the other real speciality of these highlands is the Eurasian cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*. You can see cuckoos pretty well anywhere in Arabia but this area is the only place that they have been regularly heard calling. Barbara Couldrey, a regular visitor to these mountains, tells me that she has heard them calling from 9 Feb to early April during the last three seasons. The fact that it calls suggests that it breeds probably in the same manner in which it does in Israel and Palestine, laying eggs early in the spring and immediately leaving the area, presumably to spend the rest of the summer further north. I was lucky to hear it during my short trip, in exactly the same spot as I heard it on 1 March 1992.

Other rather scarce species that can be found up on the plateau include sand partridge *Ammoperdix heyi*, long billed pipit *Anthus similis*, Hume's wheatear *Oenanthe alboniger*, scrub warbler *Scotocerca inquieta*, house bunting *Emberiza striolata* and some of the purest looking rock doves *Columba livia* you are likely to see in this part of eastern Arabia.. Birds of prey include Bonelli's eagles *Hieraaetus fasciatus* and kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. Wadi Bei is a good spot to find trumpeter finch *Bucanetes githagineus*, I only heard them. The plateau is also good for rare migrants and winter visitors.

There are numerous camp site opportunities at 900-1,000 m on abandoned terraces, but prepare for a cold night in spring at 1,000 m. Tips, do not leave camp sites unattended - the local goats will eat everything organic and quite a lot that is not. There is no fuel or shops so take all you need.

Part the way up the Wadi Bei there is an Oman border post where tracks go to the northern tip of Musandam and to Dibba. Over the years this post has required various formalities to allow passage over these roads. I was unable to get through to Dibba that way without an Oman visa. At the Dibba end there have generally been no formalities, but you cannot continue further into Musandam without a visa and I was not able to get onto the Wadi Bei track from the Dibba track without a permit from the Oman police in Dibba. Anyone thinking of doing the trip eheek before you travel as the picture seems to change every few weeks.

Michael Jennings



Based on transect counts on Socotra there is an estimated population of 6,500 Golden-winged grosbeaks *Rhynchostruthus socrotanus* on the island (Richard Porter).

## Note on birds Feeding - Kuwait

Very little is published specifically on the diet of birds in Arabia. In fact there are only two papers of any value. The most important is probably that of Morrison-Scott (1937). That author was interested in the protective adaptations of insects and the taste preferences of birds taking insects. He analysed the stomach contents of 165 birds of 52 species collected from January to April 1934, within a radius of 24 km of Jeddah. (Most of these specimens were collected by Harry Philby and George Latimer Bates). Morrison-Scott did not obtain any conclusive results for his own research but presented an invaluable record of bird diet in one small area of Arabia and made numerous valuable general statements of diet, for example ants were the staple food of 47% of all specimens examined. The only other paper is part of the report on the OSME survey of Yemen in autumn 1985 where notes are presented on 37 species, detailing food and feeding methods observed (Brooks, 1987). Further notes on the diet of endemic birds in Yemen were published elsewhere in the same issue of *Sandgrouse* 9.

The diet of birds and how they find food is an important part of

(Continued on page 23).



Clockwise from top left. 1. Hoopoe lark *Alaemon alaudipes* with an ant, Kuwait. Page 21. (Photo: Pekka Fagel). 2. Bar-tailed desert lark *Ammanotus cincturus* nestlings, Sabah al Ahmed reserve, Kuwait. (Photo: Khalid al Nasrallah). 3. Purple gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Sulaibikhat bay reserve, Kuwait. Page 21. (Photo: Khalid al Nasrallah). 4. Sacred ibis, Safah, Oman, this species is now turning up all over eastern Arabia and breeds at three sites at least. Page 16. (Photo: Peter Scott). 5. Grey heron *Ardea cinerea* with chamaeleon prey, Masirah island, Oman. Page 24. (Photo: Henning Kunze).

how species fit into the Arabian environment, which species competes with which for food and habitat and may also provide the explanation as to why two apparently very similar species can live side by side in the same environment. Despite the best efforts of the two papers mentioned the amount of information on these subjects in respect of Arabian birds is still pitifully small. Part of the species accounts included in the final ABBA will give details of food and feeding observed actually in Arabia and the above papers have been an extremely useful source for the subject. But much more information is needed. ABBA surveys collect this data but very little information on these subjects is reported by other observers, despite various pleas in past issues of *Phoenix*.

During ABBA Survey 37 to Kuwait the following notes on food and feeding of breeding or potentially breeding species were noted, and are given here as an example of what data can be collected in a relatively short (two week) birding trip.

**Grey heron** *Ardea cinerea* Numerous on the mudflats of Kuwait Bay (NB35), a place said to be the most prolific site in Arabia for mudskippers with, I understand, three species present. Two nestlings on Bubiyan island (OA36) regurgitated mudskipper meals when approached.

**Griffon vulture** *Gyps fulvus* One with three steppe eagles *Aquila nipalensis* and an imperial eagle *A. heliaca*, were sitting round a large dhub lizard *Uromastix* sp, which had probably been killed by one of the eagles.

**Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* This species was very common in rather featureless desert near the Iraq border which appeared to hold few opportunities for feeding. One was seen eating a large scarab beetle and another was seen to swoop down to the desert surface but apparently missed its prey. When the spot was located a small hole was found and with a minimum of excavation a young desert monitor *Varanus griseus* about 30 cm long was retrieved.

**Spotted crane** *Porzana porzana* One feeding at dusk at Sulaibikhat bay reserve (NB35) was feeding at the base of reeds *Phragmites* in an area where the water was about 2 cm deep it pecked at the water surface and base of exposed reeds, also probed into the water as if searching for invertebrates with its bill and picked items from the mud surface. On dry land it pecked what appeared to be insects off a halophytic plant. It was also seen to pull floating vegetation aside as if to disturb prey underneath or to better see into the water.

**Purple gallinule** *Porphyrio porphyrio* An adult of captive origin at Sulaibikhat reserve was seen feeding in rank vegetation at a small artificial pond, it was eating whole seed heads of a sow thistles *Sonchus* sp.

**Slender-billed Gull** *Larus genie* Surface pecking whilst swimming in Kuwait bay. One followed the Failaka ferry for about 10 km and was twice seen to momentarily harass Black-headed gulls *Larus ridibundus* which had food items.

**White-breasted kingfisher** *Halcyon smyrnensis* George Gregory told me that he had seen one kill and take away a chiffchaff *Phylloscopus colybita* at Jahra in a previous season.

**Hoopoe lark** *Alaemon alaudipes* A photo taken by Pekka Fagel in spring 2006 shows one catching a large ant. Another was photographed feeding grasshoppers to unfledged young out of the nest by Khalid al Nasrallah.

**Temminck's horned lark** *Eremophila bilopha* An adult picked grass seeds from a growing plant and fed them to a recently fledged juvenile.

**Yellow wagtail** *Motacilla flava* Groups of migrants were seen to follow herds of sheep and goats way out in the desert, presumably to obtain invertebrates they disturbed.

**White-cheeked bulbul** *Pycnonotus leucogenys* One eating the green leaves of a dandelion plant *Taraxacum* sp. Another was feeding on winged queen ants caught on the ground at a swarming.

**Hypocolius** *Hypocolius ampelinus* Two birds feeding on the berries of salt loving shrub *Nitraria retusa* adjacent to the coast.

**Graceful warbler** *Prinia gracilis* Food fed to nestlings included caterpillars, other grubs and spiders. An adult was seen to eat small ants on a halophytic bush.

**Savi's warbler** *Locustella luscinioides* Fed on ground at base of reed stalks at dusk.

**Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus colybita* Not a breeding bird but the following incident is reported to illustrate that the food being taken might not be what it at first appears. At Sulaibikhat bay reserve one appeared to be feeding on the pollen or nectar of tamarisk flowers or perhaps even the seeds. However when the flowers were examined closely they were found to contain many insects, including small beetles and small spiders. It was probably these which the chiffchaff was eating.

**Red-tailed shrike** *Lanius isabellinus* One eating a darkling beetle and another eating a caterpillar at Tulha (NB36). Another was carrying a small lizard into a bush presumably to eat or impale it. On a further occasion one was flycatching for winged queen ants at a swarming and impaling them on thorns. One ant fell off its thorn and the shrike painstakingly retrieved it from the ground among plants and re-impaled it, despite there being a super abundance of food easier to hand.

**Woodchat shrike** *Lanius senator* One with a lizard prey about 12 cm long.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* Individuals birds were seen in an aerial chase of a locust (unsuccessful), flycatching for a moth, eating an apple core and taking away mulberries for young. One came on board the ferry from Failaka and stayed until about 1 km offshore, eating bread and other food scraps. Another visited a swarming of winged queen ants and collected them on the ground and took them off by the beak full to feed young. On the same occasions other individuals were eating them on the spot.

**Spanish Sparrow** *Passer hispaniolensis* A flock feeding on the seeds of sow thistle *Sonchus* sp. and the flower buds of a dock like plant *Rumex* sp? Another flock was taking grass seeds from standing grasses and pecking at the ground nearby.

In the introduction to his paper cited Duncan Brooks said that the information he collected should be a useful source material for future workers and added that it seemed a pity that such information normally stays in field note books - if it gets even as far as that. Most notes on these subjects are still not getting into field note books and certainly do not get to ABBA files very frequently from observers. Unpublished information on food taken by birds, the method of feeding and places they find food will be gratefully received. Age of data is immaterial. Please send any information, showing species, place, date and notes of food and feeding. Information received by summer 2007 will still be in time to be added to the respective species accounts.



I would like to thank all those who helped me during my trip to Kuwait in March 2006, particularly George Gregory for the guided tour of all Kuwait birds spots and to Brian Foster for the loan of his vehicle to us. Thanks also to Khalid al Nasrallah, Mamoud Shobrak and Pekka Fagel for company on some days in the field, especially a most rewarding trip to Bubiyan island which has been a long term dream of mine.

**References:** ● Brooks, D J. 1987. Feeding observations on birds in North Yemen. *Sandgrouse* 9: 115-120. ● Morrison-Scott, T C S. 1937. The effectiveness of protective adaptations in insects with reference to an examination of stomach contents of birds from Jidda. *Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.* 107: 51-70.  
Michael Jennings

## Grey Herons eating Chamaeleons on Masirah Island

by Henning Kunze

Grey herons *Ardea cinerea*, like most herons, eat some odd things. In fact almost anything animal they can catch and swallow (details e.g. Glutz von Blotzheim & Bauer 1987). Greaves (1991) mentions various birds caught, killed and eaten on Masirah island (YB18), Oman, including a hoopoe *Upupa epops* which was swallowed whole after a long struggle, during which time the unfortunate huddud was dunked, shaken and stabbed by the heron. During my research on migrant birds on Masirah in autumn 2006 I have seen grey herons eating palm dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, rose-coloured starling *Sturnus roseus* and a tree snake *Psammodromus schokari* of which there is a small population on the island.

Perhaps my most interesting observation of grey heron diet concerned the species preying chamaeleons in a small plantation of trees, known as "the orchard" south of Hilf. The report was questioned initially as chamaeleons are not known from northern Oman, let alone Masirah island but there was no doubt when I produced the pictures. My observations show that a significant population of chamaeleons has become established in at least two sites on the island. The species has not yet been identified but may possibly be *Chamaeleo calyptratus* of western Yemen, rather than the species that inhabits Dhofar, which might be more expected.

At the end of September I saw several grey herons fly into the fenced plantation area to hunt the chamaeleons. A number of times I saw a heron catch a chamaeleon. Chamaeleons are rather slow and cumbersome on the ground and the herons catch them as they change trees in the plantation. The reptiles put up quite a fight, wrapping around the heron's neck. I have seen up to five of the reptiles in a day and I estimate that there are probably many more than 20 at the orchard site. Some individuals are up to 50 cm long and others less than 20 cm, which indicates a mature breeding population. In late autumn I noticed that the chamaeleons were digging holes in sandy banks which at first I thought may be to lay eggs but I think, with hindsight, that they were digging hibernation retreats, because I did not see any more chamaeleons after mid November.

**References:** ● Glutz von Blotzheim, U. N. & K. M. Bauer 1987. *Handbuch der Vögel Mitteleuropas, Bd 1. Gaviiformes — Phoenicopteriformes*. 2., durchges. Aufl., Wiesbaden. ● Greaves, C. 1991. Grey Heron catching, killing & swallowing Hoopoe. *Brit. Birds* 84:57-58.

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Oriental white-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*, still only a one site bird in Arabia, at Mahawt Island (YA18) central Oman

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